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WESTERN

BIG 132 PAGES

THE MAN ON THE STAGE

WAS HE WEARING A GUN
ONLY TO PROTECT THE GIRL
DRAMATIC BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

LEWIS B. PATTEN

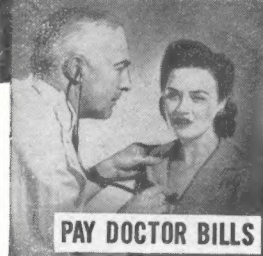


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JAN.
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★ ★ BRAND NEW DRAMATIC BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★

THE MAN ON THE STAGE Lewis B. Patten 12

A chance to run the stageline from Denver City to the mines on the Vasquez, was all the FO, DC & A boss said he asked. But Cole Estes could see that what the man really wanted was a gun-guard for his pretty daughter, and a trouble-shooter to bullet-blast every competitive Concord Oxbow off the overland trails!

★ ★ THRILL-PACKED FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★

TRIGGER TRIAL OF THE XT Harrison Colt 84

Bart Corey didn't consider that the odds were stacked against him. Sure, it was his one gun against the filed triggers of the giant XT's numerous Colt-handy crew — but he also had his badge, and to Bart that symbolized the backing of every law-abiding citizen of the county!

★ ★ TENSE NOVELET ★ ★

RING-TAILED RANNY Hascal Giles 73

The salty townsman with the big Frontier Colt held that Hardwicke Mason was lying in his teeth when he claimed he'd been Wild Bill's deputy — just like Mason had hired him to say!

★ ★ 4 CRACK SHORT STORIES ★ ★

TEXAS' LAST GREAT MANHUNT Will C. Brown 6

There was nothing in the morning air to indicate that it would suddenly crackle with killer bullets

COLD TRAIL Will Cotton 60

Caleb James had shot it out with gunslicks before; he savvied his chances. But this time so much more than his life rode on the speed of his draw

A HUNDRED NOTCHES IN HIS GUN-BUTT John Lumsden 113

The button sized Williams as a badman . . . maybe that's what he was

LAST STAND Stephen Payne 125

Odd that in this moment Bob Elton should be comparing Enid, the ranch girl, with Audrey, the girl from the East



ROBERT O. ERISMAN, Editor

ARTHUR LANE, Associate

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TEXAS' LAST GREAT MANHUNT

by WILL C. BROWN

THE TIP on the killer was third-handed when it got to Sheriff Satterwhite in Big Spring, and the trail was already twenty-fours old. He checked it over with his deputy and decided it was worth a try. But he would make the trip to Merkel alone.

Satterwhite's staff already was short-handed in Big Spring. The murder had not been a particularly spectacular one.

All that Satterwhite had learned from the settlement of cautious-speaking Mexicans was that Juan Hernandez had been shot and killed by a man named Morales.

And now, in the cool spring Sunday morning of March 21, 1925, Sheriff W. W. Satterwhite drove alone from Big Spring to Merkel. There was

needle in a haystack to find one unknown Mexican named Morales, Reeves could spare the time. He would join Satterwhite and they would take a look.

Through the rest of the day, the two officers cruised in Satterwhite's car, over the side roads, prairie trails, and farm routes.

No luck. And Monday was the same.

"There's one grubbing camp left," Reeves said at the end of that day. "It's in the roughs, somewhere south of here."

Satterwhite said, "All right. We'll try one more time. Then I'd better get back home."

Tuesday morning they found the camp in rough country. The two officers separated to approach the camp

There was nothing in the morning air to indicate that it would suddenly crackle with killer bullets

nothing in the air to indicate that the last and biggest of the great manhunts of the region was about to begin.

Parking his car on Merkel's Main Street, Satterwhite walked about the little town until he found the local deputy, George Reeves.

"I'm looking for a Mexican named Morales," the sheriff told Reeves. "He's supposed to have killed another Mexican in our town, man named Juan Hernandez. The tip we got, George, was that he might be hiding out at a Mexican grubbing camp somewhere around here. You know where such a camp might be?"

Deputy Reeves considered. There were several land-clearing jobs going on around Merkel. There might be some Mexican grubbing camps. And while it might be like looking for a

afoot from opposite sides.

As Deputy Reeves reached the clearing, a Mexican rushed from a small shack, firing wildly.

Bullets screamed in the morning air.

When Satterwhite raced around the shack from the other side, the Mexican had vanished into the brush. Deputy George Reeves lay critically wounded.

Satterwhite lifted the unconscious man. Then, at a trot, he hurried across new-cleared land to a farm house he could see in the distance.

"I want to phone into Merkel for a doctor," he told them. "You got a phone here?"

But there was no telephone.

So Satterwhite borrowed the farm-

(please turn to page 8)

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er's car and drove back toward the clearing where he had left Reeves.

He had gone only a short distance down the road when a blast of gunfire shook the countryside for the second time that morning.

Morales had cracked down from ambush. One bullet struck Satterwhite in the right side, passing through his heart. The car zig-zagged across the road and came to a stop when it ran into a barbed-wire fence.

CREEPING cautiously through the brush, Morales approached the car, ascertained that Satterwhite was dead, took sixgun and ammunition from the warm body.

Then he made his way through the mesquites, found the wounded Reeves, and put two shots through the deputy's head at point-blank range.

With three murders now under his belt, the blood-crazed Morales took flight. He forced his brother, a worker on the grubbing crew, to accompany him. Armed with both Satterwhite's and Reeves' guns and ammunition, the two men seemed to vanish into thin air.

That afternoon, word of the double killing trickled into Merkel. After that, it was a matter of only two hours until the news was flashing up and down West Texas. Telephones jangled in many a sheriff's office in many a county seat town. Wayside constables, village policemen, big-town deputies and detectives—finally the Rangers. Two of their brother officers had been murdered in cold blood.

The big-manhunt was on.

Texas ranchmen, many another private citizen, like the officers dropped whatever they were doing. Suddenly, all roads led to Sweetwater. That county-seat town, between

Merkel and Big Spring, was made headquarters.

From a hundred miles and more they came. Weather-beaten, grim-lipped old-timers, and young men, too. Six-guns bulged under the coats. Their automobiles, bristled with the ranchman's sidekick weapon—the Winchester .30-30.

In Sweetwater by the scores they poured through the sheriff's office, pausing only long enough to get directions and orders, then poured out again to the roads, highways and ranch country, bent on traditional western vengeance.

Sheriff Yarbrough of Sweetwater, Sheriff O'Bar of Abilene, Sheriff Miller of Pain Rock and Chief of Police Buck Johnson assumed charge of organizing the hunt.

Within a few hours, a hundred men were combing the hills in Taylor and Nolan counties. By nightfall, their forces had been more than doubled. By midnight, the posse numbered an estimated five hundred.

Cautiously, they combed the canyons, hills, fields and rangeland.

Through the night, the hunt jumped from one locality to another as conflicting reports came in. The scene shifted rapidly from the Bitter Creek canyons to the Divide farm country, back to the Merkel region, then to the Jim Ned hills.

Residents throughout the section were warned by telephone or messengers. Householders in the area for a hundred miles south and southwest sat up all night in ranch and farm houses, with guns in their hands.

The Texas National Guard company at Merkel, armed with a machine gun and army rifles, joined in the hunt.

On the next day, Wednesday, bloodhounds arrived from Paint Rock and
(please turn to page 10)



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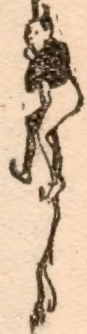
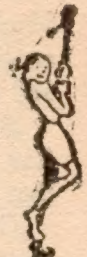
" . . . Two of my friends have won £500 each since receiving your mascots, and another has married an American millionaire . . . Please forward me one 'Joan the Wad' and one 'Jack O'Lantern.'" C. E., Levenshulme.

BETTER JOB, MORE MONEY, LESS HOURS, IMPROVED HEALTH

"My dear Joan . . . She has brought me continual good luck and her influence spreads to every sphere . . . I have got a much better job . . . greater wages . . . less working hours . . . and my health has greatly improved. I have always been a lonely kind of person, but . . . a friend of the opposite sex, she is also lonely . . . great opportunity for comradeship offered. So you see how the influence of Joan works. My pockets have always been full and I have had many wishes and desires fulfilled . . . I would not part with Joan for her weight in gold, she is much too valuable in every way. Her powers extend all over the world, and she works unceasingly for the full benefit of her friends and adherents. She rides in my pocket day and night and never leaves me." D. H. Leeds, 9.

Just send Two Dollar notes or an International Money Order and a large self-addressed envelope to:

JOAN'S COTTAGE 3, LANIVET, BODMIN, CORNWALL, ENG.
and I will send you both History and Mascot.



Lubbock. Two airplanes went into service and constantly circled the territory.

THAT MORNING, the bloodhounds were put on the killer's trail sixteen miles south of Merkel. The trail was picked up there after a Mexican believed to be Morales had appeared at an isolated farm house and asked for food.

But Morales had a long start before a searching party came across that clue.

The manhunters now numbered more than five-hundred.

Wednesday passed, however, with no sighting of the fugitive.

Then, at daybreak Thursday, came the break the officers had been hoping for. Morales would have to appear somewhere. He would have to find food.

News came that a Mexican had appeared at the Millerto farm near Ovalo, southeast of Merkel, and had asked for food. Bloodhounds were again rushed to seek the trail. They picked up a scent at a haystack where there were signs that two men had slept during the night.

While the larger element of the army-like forces worked in that territory, a few officers with a small group of carefully chosen men acted on a hunch and quietly moved ahead by automobile to Lawn, a village near Ovalo.

This group included Yarbrough, Johnson and an Abilene deputy named Lige Jennings.

They sighted a string of railroad work cars on a siding near Lawn.

Mexicans in the section gang were questioned. All of them denied knowledge of the fugitive.

Nevertheless, the small detachment of officers, worked down the string of cars, methodically searching one after another.

It was mid-afternoon. The searchers had despaired of finding any trace of Morales there.

There was talk of moving back to the larger unit at Ovalo, to get a new report on the progress of the bloodhounds.

Sheriff Yarbrough, Chief Johnson and Deputy Jennings conferred briefly.

Somebody remarked, "Well, there's one more car on the end of this string. We might as well take a look in it, too. Then we'll head back for Ovalo."

As they tried to recall it later, the next few minutes were a time of nightmarish action, hazy happenings, and high suspense.

Somebody remembered that Deputy Jennings said he would look into the last work car. The group of officers were scattered a little, along the siding tracks. In the distance, the section gang worked.

Cautiously, as was his nature from long experience, the tall Deputy Jennings swung up the step of the last work car.

With one hand he held his Colt. He put his shoulder against the wooden door. It swun gslowly inward.

Somebody must have seen the movement inside. For a voice yelled, "Look out, Lige!"

In the same instant, they heard the blast of a gun from inside the car.

Jennings jumped backward. A bullet had grazed across his stomach. Death for him had been only an inch away.

"It's Morales!" he called to the others. "He's in there, all right!"

Texas' last great manhunt was nearing its climax.

Quickly, the little group of officers took cover and opened fire on the

(please turn to page 111)

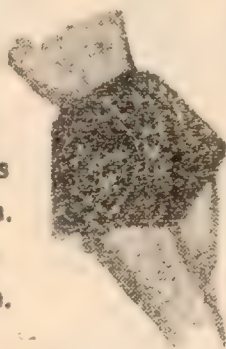
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THE MAN ON THE

WAS HE WEARING THE GUN ONLY TO PROTECT
THE GIRL? . . .



"Now I'm going to cut you to pieces," he panted.

THIS LAND had lain unchanged over a thousand years, marked only by the game trails, by the buffalo wallows, by the fleeting pause of an Indian village upon its vastness.

Now a new scar lay upon it, a two-track road, winding ever westward toward the distant elusiveness of snow-clad mountain range. The coach that ran down this rutted road, raising a thin plume of dust behind, was no glittering, yellow-wheeled thing of beauty. Its hard-wood sides had weathered to a dingy gray and the

grain stood out from the sandblasting of prairie storm, from the pitiless erosion of mud and water.

The painted legend of ownership, defaced by the same forces that had dimmed the glory of the Troy's first beauty, announced that it belonged to the line of Forrest Overland, Denver City and Auraria, or abbreviated, the FO, DC & A.

Four passengers rattled about inside the shell of rocking coach, and of these, only Cole Estes still held his temper in check, still could contain the irascibility and ill-humor that a

STAGE

BRAND NEW DRAMATIC
BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL



A chance to run a stageline from Denver City to the mines on the Vasquez, was all the FO, DC & A boss said he asked. But Cole Estes could see that what the man really wanted was a gun-guard for his pretty daughter, and a trouble-shooter to bullet-blast every competitive _____ Concord Oxbow off the overland trails! _____

week's jolting travel over the world's roughest roads could engender in even the gentlest of humans.

One of these four was a girl. She sat directly across from Cole, and she had fallen into a numbed and exhaust-

ed stupor. This merciful unconsciousness robbed her of arrogant imperiousness, of consciousness of her own dazzling beauty, things that were so prominent in her awake.

Her long lashes lay against smooth

cheeks, and her full lips, relaxed this way, were soft and strangely inviting. Beneath the heavy material of her woolen traveling dress, firm and youthful breasts rose and fell evenly with her breathing. Her knee was warm against Cole's own. Sweat put a shine to her nose and cheeks that oddly increased her attraction for Cole.

He caught himself thinking thoughts about her that were not exactly proper. His gray eyes lost their hardness momentarily, but then he thought, "Sleep only shows her for what she might have been, not for the spoiled and willful brat she is."

His steady glance upon her and these thoughts of his, must have penetrated her unconsciousness, for she stirred, moaned softly, and opened her eyes. Cole tactfully turned his glance out of the window, and stared moodily at the sameness of rolling grassland, of deep arroyo, of treeless infinity.

He was a big man and sat with an easy relaxation that cushioned him against the shock of the coach slamming interminably down against reach and bolster. His face could have been called handsome or ugly with equal veracity. It bore no single feature which was fine, being too rugged and hard for that. In the aggregate it showed force of will, strength and stubbornness.

The eyes, gray and direct, could be unfeeling and brutal, yet at times during this journey they had rested on the girl across from him with an almost unwilling gentleness and a lurking humor, as though her arrogance did not displease him nearly so much as it amused him. But except for this slight hint of gentleness, his was the face of the eagle, and wildness was its single dominating effect.

He wore rumpled woolen trousers and a buckskin shirt, too tight across his broad shoulders, that revealed the flexing of long, tough muscles

whenever he moved. His hair, cropped short, was curly and reminded you in color of a prime beaver pelt.

Now he became aware of the low talk between the rawboned Missouri farmer, Hobart, and Schoonover, the merchant from Boston.

"Gold," said Hobart, "is all there is in this stinking country that is worth a man's time."

"Commerce is important," reiterated Schoonover pompously. "There is more profit in that than in grubbing a stream for gold."

IT WAS AN argument that had gone on, intermittently but steadily nevertheless, ever since the stage had left Leavenworth. Cole Estes felt a touch of impatience. He said, "Grubbing a stream for gold is productive, and commerce supplies the producers. Both are necessary. Let each man do what he is fitted for and why argue it out hour after hour?"

The girl, Norah Forrest, gave this talk her attention, obviously out of sheer boredom, yet she gave the impression of keeping herself apart, and her air was haughty. She asked, needling Cole, "And what do you think you are fitted for, Mr. Estes?"

He put his glance full upon her and his thought was plain on his face, "Fitted for taking some of that childish snobbery out of you, perhaps, if I had the time and opportunity." But he only said, "Fitted for what I am doing, which is to ride this rattletrap into Denver and take the job that is waiting for me.

Already he found himself regretting the thing he had taken on. He thought, "If this coach is a fair sample of Mike Forrest's stageline, then he did some tall lying in his letter. If his daughter is a fair sample of the women a man can expect to find in Denver City, then I would have done better to stay in St. Louis."

Cole Estes was a stagecoach man, born and raised with the rumble of heavy wheels in his ears. Because he

knew the business, and because he had demonstrated an affinity for a fight on numerous occasions, he was the one that Mike Forrest, whom he had known in Illinois five years ago when they both worked on the Illinois Central and Kansas Territory, had come to.

"There's a squeeze on me here," Mike had written. "The IC & KT, driven out of business in Illinois by the railroads, have moved their headquarters here and are up to their old tricks of eliminating the competition, which in this case happens to be me. I've got a good deal here, Cole, a mail contract and a chance to run a line from Denver City to the mines on the Vasquez. I've got some pretty good equipment for a small outfit. But I'm too old to put up the fight it's going to take to beat them. There's a quarter interest in it for you if you want to come, and we whip the big boys."

A "P.S." at the end of Mike's letter had suggested, "My girl's coming out here, leaving Leavenworth on the 20th of August. I worry some about her traveling on my line, and I wouldn't let her travel on theirs. Maybe you could time your trip so's you could ride the same coach with her. I'd consider it a big favor, Cole. I'd know she was safe then."

So here he was, wet-nurse to a high-and-mighty squirt of a girl, heading into a trouble-shooting job on a line that probably wasn't worth the candle. He shook his head impatiently, still dimly aware of the steady drone of conversation within the stage.

THE COACH dipped into a cut-bank, crossed a wide and nearly dry riverbed, turning then to ascend the opposite bank. Turned thus, Cole had a glimpse of another stage thundering along behind them, and this stage was as different from the one he had seen as a Kentucky race horse is different from a shaggy Indian pony.

Under a thick layer of dust, its wheels gleamed brilliant yellow. Neither dust, nor mud, had been able to entirely dull the gleam of its side panels, lustrous varnish that even yet threw back the gleam of afternoon's brassy sun. A Concord Oxbow. A new one.

Automatically and without thinking, Cole scanned the road ahead, the road that wound along the precipitous riverbank. Knowing all the tricks of stageline war, his thought could not but be, "A perfect place for wrecking another coach."

He shrugged and forced himself to relax against the seatback. Conversation had stopped within the coach and both Hobart and the girl, who faced the rear, now pulled aside the curtains and craned their necks for a glimpse of the strange coach. Schoonover grumbled, "If I'd known they were this close behind us, I'd have ridden in that coach and been comfortable."

Norah stiffened and started to speak, her bridling anger plain. But Cole interrupted, "I've ridden them all, my friend, and there's little difference. They're not made for comfort or intended for it, just to get you where you're going, alive if possible."

Schoonover grumbled unintelligibly. Cole said now, his oblique glance on Norah, "I've a notion the lady is related to Mike Forrest who owns this line. Your blamed grumbling is getting her goat."

He became aware of the Concord's lead team drawing abreast, and suddenly the driver's whip popped sharply above their heads. Deeper into the harness they seemed to lunge, and in an instant their increased speed brought the second team into view.

Cole growled. "Devil of a place to pass," uneasiness a pressure upon him. His body bunched and tightened involuntarily against the seat, and now he remembered his responsibility to Mike who expected him to bring Norah through safely simply by his presence in the coach with her.

A quick glance to his right showed how perilously near the bank were the wheels of the Troy. And then suddenly Cole was on his feet as he felt the front wheel of the Concord touch their own rear wheel. Leaning across Schoonover, he thrust his head from the window. "Pull up, damn you! You want to put us in the river?"

He got no answer, but he heard a laugh, mocking, faint, all but lost in the rumble of wheels, in the thunder of hooves.

Alarmed thoroughly now, Cole pulled himself back and thrust his head and shoulders through the window on his own side of the coach. Standing on the seat he could just reach the baggage rack atop the coach. Gripping this, he pulled his legs through the window, dangled a moment, and then began the swinging, climbing ascent. He felt the touch of wheels again. He yelled at the driver above him, "Pull left, you crazy fool! Don't let him pass you here!"

The driver, high-cheekboned and slit-eyed as an Indian, threw him a pitying and disgusted glance over his shoulder that said plainly, "I got to drive hosses that ought to be pullin' freight wagons. I got to ride stages like this one. On top of all that I got to listen to a loud-mouthed passenger tell me how to drive."

These things, Cole knew, he would have said if he had time. Cole's head came up until he could look over the coach at the Concord. In the faces of both driver and guard, he could see cold, impersonal confidence and only then did Cole know surely that their plain intent was to put the Troy over the bank and into the dry river-bed.

Crouched atop the swaying pile of freight and baggage, Cole half drew his gun, but stopped as the muzzle of the guard's rifle swung to cover him. The man, bearded and red-faced, a giant of a man, shouted, "Put it up, or I'll blow you clear off of

there," and Cole let his hand come reluctantly away.

THE DRIVER of the Troy, hunched and intent, now drew his horses left, relentlessly, recklessly. Cole felt the Concord's front wheel lock with the Troy's rear wheel and heard Norah Forrest's shrill scream. The driver must have heard it too, must have suddenly become aware of her, of his responsibility to her because she was Mike Forrest's daughter, for he tightened his reins. Unwill- ingness, reluctance, was in the disgusted shake of his head.

Now, Cole thought, the Concord would pull clear, knowing a woman was involved. This must have been the driver's thought as well, for he kept this steady pull against his reins. As the Troy slowed, the Concord moved on, cleared their wheel, then forged steadily ahead. Cole turned sick with the realization that the safety of this woman meant less than nothing to them.

The driver of the Troy seized his whip and it snaked out across the backs of his teams, popping violently. The horses laid into their traces, but this came too late. The coach was too ponderous, too heavily laden to show a change of speed in the split seconds that were left.

Relentlessly the Concord drew ahead until it was full abreast of the smaller coach. Cole knew the pattern of what would happen now. The driver of the Concord would crowd his horses roughly against those drawing the smaller Troy, forcing them off the bank.

Suddenly rage possessed Cole completely. He seized the whip from its socket beside the driver. It snaked out, but this time laid itself full across the back of the Concord's guard. The man rose out of his seat, a harsh shout of pain breaking from his lips. His rifle fell into the whirling dust between the two coaches. Cole drew his revolver. The driver turned to yell

at him, "Get the lead hoss on the far side!"

The Troy lurched violently. The driver sprawled out across the seat, fighting to hold his reins, fighting for balance. Cole felt the lurch as it started and flung himself down recklessly, and it was only this that saved him from being thrown clear. But in the instant it took him to regain his feet, to again raise the Colt's, the Concord's teams were drawn roughly against his own horses, forcing them in a screaming, fighting tangle off the bank, a sheer drop of ten feet.

The coach tilted at an awful angle, and Cole was flung clear, still clutching his revolver.

His last consciousness was of a terrible, rending crash as the old Troy toppled into the riverbed, of Norah Forrest's terrified scream. Then he struck the hard-baked, sandy clay of the riverbed and knew the whirling sickness, the brassy taste of descending unconsciousness. But before full blackness overtook him, he had the hazy remembrance of a flurry of shots, of distant, violent shouting.

CHAPTER II

THE STAGE WON'T BE COMING

WETNESS along his whole side brought Cole to his knees, and he found himself in the middle of the thin stream that was Bijou Creek in late summer. Not fully comprehending the circumstance that had put him here, he stared dazedly about him. He saw the coach, lying on its side, its wheels still spinning. Dust raised by its falling had not yet settled.

He muttered thickly, "Couldn't have been out more'n a minute or two." He struggled to his feet, head throbbing and whirling. A steady, low cursing came from within the coach. Cole climbed to the top side of it and raised the door until it lay open,

until he could look down inside. Hobart, the lanky farmer, broke off his steady cursing, and squinted up at Cole. Cole asked, his eyes glued to the still form of Norah Forrest, "You hurt, man?"

Hobart grunted, "Shook up. I think that's all," and struggled to his feet.

Cole lowered himself into the coach and pulled the inert form of Schoonover from across Norah's body. Blood oozed from a gash in Schoonover's forehead.

Now he knelt beside Norah Forrest. She lay tumbled in a heap against the door, utterly still. Hobart asked, "What the devil happened? It looked to me like they deliberately wrecked us."

"They did." Cole laid his head against Norah's breasts and as he felt their regular movement, sighed with relief. "Mike would never forgive me if she was hurt," he muttered under his breath.

He gathered her into his arms and stood up, lying her on the top side of the coach while he climbed out. Then he took her again, and carried her to a place shaded from the sun by the bank and laid her down. Hobart followed him out, limping. "What about Schoonover?"

"Toss a hatful of water into his face. He'll come out of it."

Hobart limped back toward the coach to look for his hat. Cole tore a strip of lace from Norah's exposed petticoat and soaked it in the narrow stream. Returning, he stared down at her for a moment. Her dress, revealingly low-cut, had fallen away from her shapely ankles. Her hair, not quite black, was in complete disarray.

Sprawled out this way, her face smudged and dirty, there was an earthiness about this girl that Cole would not have believed possible. Her dress molded each curve of her body faithfully, showed its sensual, virginal beauty. He felt again a strong attraction and he said aloud, "There's noth-

ing much wrong with you that the flat of Mike's hand once in a while wouldn't cure."

He knelt and realized suddenly that a thin film of sweat had dampened his brow. He bathed the dirt carefully from Norah's face. Norah stirred but did not awake. Suddenly, conscious of Hobart's glance, Cole stood up. His voice carried an unwonted hoarseness. "She'll come out of it in a minute," he said, "and then she can tell us for herself where she's hurt. Hanged if I want to poke around looking for broken bones."

Schoonover sat on the sand beside the coach, looking like a five year old who was about to cry. Hobart asked worriedly, "How the devil we going to get to Denver City now?"

"The next station couldn't be over fifteen miles." Cole rummaged about in the sand until he found his gun. He removed the barrel, and poked a scrap of his shirt through it. Reassembling the gun, he walked to the place, fifty feet away, where two of the horses lay, legs broken, in a welter of tangled harness. He placed a shot in the head of each and then came back, reloading the Colt's from the powder flask he carried at his belt. "I'll go see if I can catch one of the others in a minute," he told Hobart. "You and Schoonover stay here with her. The Indians aren't hostile, but all this plunder scattered out on the ground would be one devil of a temptation."

THE SHOTS had brought Norah Forrest out of her unconsciousness. Now she sat up, her eyes dazed and uncomprehending. A quick stab of worry turned Cole's voice unnecessarily rough. "Can you stand up?"

She nodded.

"Do it then. I've got to know if you're hurt before I leave."

For an instant she stared at him. Then stubborn and willful anger stirred in her dark eyes. "Just who do

you think you are anyway? I'm perfectly comfortable right here and I have no intention of getting up!"

Cole went to her and stood for a moment, looking down. "Last chance," he grinned.

She did not reply. Haughty arrogance grew in her face. Cole reached down and caught her under her arms, bringing her to her feet. The arrogance left her and her lower lip turned soft and trembling. Cole thought frantically, "Hell, she's going to bawl!" He asked contritely, "You're hurt, aren't you?" still holding her.

Wetness grew in the girl's eyes, but she fought this back, glaring. "I am not! I'm perfectly all right!"

Cole said, half smiling. "I think I ought to feel your legs for broken bones."

Norah yanked her hand loose and brought it sharply against his face. Cole laughed, tightening his hold on her. She cried, "You let me go! Do you hear?" Her small hands beat futilely against his chest.

Cole asked, "Would you like to walk around and show me that your legs aren't broken?"

She nodded, glaring, her lips set in a firm, straight line. Cole released her, his eyes twinkling. Defiantly she flounced around a ten foot circle. "There! Now are you satisfied?"

"Not entirely, but it's a good start."

Hobart, poking about in the rubble of baggage, suddenly exclaimed, "God! Look at this!"

Cole left the angry girl and went behind the coach. Half buried in baggage and freight lay the driver's body. His head was twisted at an odd angle, and the life was gone from him. A strong odor of whisky rose from him. Hobart grunted, "Drunk!"

Cole said, "He was as sober as you are. That smell is from his bottle. It broke in the fall."

He shrugged impatiently. "It's getting late," he said and strode to the high bank and along it until he came

to a place where he could climb out. A quarter mile away he could see the four remaining stage horses, quietly grazing, harness still hanging from them. Along the road toward Denver, though, not more than a hundred yards away, stood a gray horse, saddled and bridled, reins dragging.

Quick surprise touched Cole. He moved in that direction, speaking soothingly to the horse as he approached. When he was but fifty feet away, he fell abruptly silent, for now he could see the man that had ridden this horse.

Recognition stirred in Cole. He broke into a run and the horse trotted nervously away, head turned so that his feet did not step on the trailing reins.

The man on the ground was a short man, stockily built, with a mane of shaggy hair, turning gray. One of his eyes had been shot away, and in its place was a horror of red and clotted blood. His other eye was open, staring and vacant. Cole croaked, "Mike, hang it, I told you I'd bring her to Denver all right! Why the devil did you have to come out to meet her?"

Moving again after the horse, he thought, "This is going to be rough on her. If she's got any of Mike in her, it'll come out now. If she hasn't ... Well, we'll see. We'll see."

PUSHING the gray, Cole reached the stage station in about two hours. It was a hastily thrown up thing of rough lumber, having but one large room downstairs, a part of which was curtained off, and a low-ceilinged loft where, Cole supposed, the women passengers slept. What furniture Cole could see was home-made, consisting of a long table, a bench on either side, a couple of packing boxes and an empty whisky keg.

Finding no one in the building, Cole came again outside and walked

to the corrals where he found the station agent currying a horse, one of six he had tied to the fence.

Cole said, "You can turn them loose. The stage won't be coming."

"Why not?" Suspicion was in the man's tone which had a dry, nasal twang. Before Cole could answer, the man asked sharply, "Who're you?"

The agent was a small man, stooped a little and very thin. His skin was like brown wrapping paper which had been stretched too tight over his face and hands, and which might crack at any moment. His eyes, intensely blue, were narrowed and sharp.

Cole said, "Name's Estes. I was coming to Denver to work for Mike Forrest. A big Concord forced us off the bank ten-fifteen miles back and wrecked us. Mike got killed. So'd the driver. I want a team and wagon to bring in the passengers and their baggage. You might, if you got two wagons, drive one and bring in the freight."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" the agent breathed. "That blamed Oxbow went through here not an hour past. Killed Mike, yuh say? Hell, if I'd knowed that, I'd a blowed the driver an' guard plumb off'n the seat!"

The agent stuck out his hand. "My name's Castle. Davey Castle. Hardly ever see a lone rider on this road. Cain't blame a man fer bein' a mite suspicious, seein' how scarce riders is around here." He took off his battered felt hat and scratched his bald dome. Thinning hair at his temples was wet with sweat and plastered against his head by the sweatband of his hat.

Cole said patiently, "How many wagons you got?"

"One—rickety as the devil. An' a wobble-wheeled buckboard."

"When's the next stage?"

"Day after t'morrow."

"Could a man make it to Denver in the buckboard?"

The agent shrugged. "You'd have t' be lucky."

"We'll try it. You can send the baggage on the next stage."

Davey Castle, Cole discovered as they caught horses and hitched up, was a voluble man. He confided in lowered tones the reason he had left Maine, which was marital difficulties, and he even went into great detail to be sure Cole fully understood the difficulties and sympathized with him. "The wife was one of these big, buxom women," he finished. "Bossy as all get-out. But my Gawd, onct a man got her in—"

Cole interrupted, "I can imagine."

Davey laughed slyly. "You got a good imagination then, brother."

Cole climbed to the spring seat of the buckboard. He asked, "This thing belong to Mike?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Mike must've taken some lessons in the art of lying. He told me he had some pretty good equipment."

Davey doubled up with laughter. He slapped a skinny thigh. "Mike eggsaggerated some," he admitted.

Cole slapped the backs of the horses with the reins, saying, "The wagon'll be slower. We'll bring in Mike and the driver. You bring everything else, huh?"

Davey nodded, and Cole drove away.

FULL DARK blanketed the plains long before Cole Estes drove the buckboard into the station yard. Fatigue had along since silenced the grumbling of Schoonover. Norah sat between Cole and Hobart on the spring seat, her face still and white. Behind, with Schoonover, rode the two bodies, blanket wrapped. As the fat merchant tumbled off behind, Cole asked, "Can you cook?"

"What's the matter with her?"

Hobart grunted, "Go lay down somewhere. I'll do it."

Norah murmured, "I can do that

much—if one of you would light the lamp for me."

Hobart said, "Sure. You come on in with me," and added over his shoulder to Cole, "I'll be out in a minute. Bring an extra shovel."

Cole drove the team to the corral, unhitched and turned them loose. Then he rummaged in the lean-to behind the station until he found two shovels whose handles were unbroken. In this inky blackness, it was difficult to find a place which might be suitable, viewed by daylight, for a burial ground.

But remembering a tiny knoll to the westward, he started his first grave there. Hobart came out shortly, and began one beside Cole's.

Cole was two feet down when he heard Norah's call to supper. He and Hobart ate their greasy side meat and potatoes in silence, then hurried back outside. When Davey Castle brought the lumbering, creaking wagon into the yard at midnight, Cole was just finishing, and Hobart was down to his shoulders. Cole said, "Deep enough," and climbed out, sweating.

He sent Hobart after the others, and when they came, bringing lanterns and the buckboard with the two bodies in it, said to Hobart, "I never went to many funerals. Do you remember what to say?"

Hobart, apparently a deeply religious man, nodded, and said the burial service in his deep, halting voice from memory. Norah Forrest stood tearless and numbed beside him.

Walking back toward the stage station, with discouragement and utter tiredness lead in his muscles and mind, Cole thought, "You were crazy, Mike. No one could build a heap of junk like you've got into anything but what it is now—or worse. I'd do you no favor, nor her either, by trying. So I'll tell her to sell out and go back home, which is what she ought to do."

With his mind made up, he slept as soon as his long body touched the hard, puncheon floor.

CHAPTER III

DENVER CITY

LIKE ITS rival across the trickle that was Cherry Creek, Denver City had a lusty air of brawling, uncouth growth. On every hand were the naked skeletons of buildings in the process of erection. From somewhere on Cole's left, he could hear the high whine of a sawmill, and over the babble of voices, shouts and ringing hooves on hard-packed streets, came the incessant chatter of hammers pounding nails, of handsaws, of sledge against iron stake.

Perhaps a dozen buildings, being two stories high, stood out above the others. At McGaa street a new bridge spanned the creek, and at Blake stood another, rickety and tilting in the middle.

From Wazee to the Platte, half hidden by cottonwoods, stretched hundreds of tents, wagons and lean-to shacks. An Indian village was a sore upon the landscape north of the furthestmost of these and between the Indian village and the town were two wagon trains, drawn into rough circles.

Norah Forrest sat between Cole and Hobart on the spring seat, and the two of them wedged her in and kept her propped upright. Cole asked, "Where were your father's corrals? And where was the stage depot?"

"The stage depot was at the Quincy House. He never mentioned the corrals."

Cole halted the buckboard before a bearded miner near the McGaa Street bridge. The man stared at the buckboard, at its crooked wheels, and said before Cole had a chance to speak, "You didn't come all the way from Leavenworth in that contraption did you brother?"

Cole shook his head, a half grin softening the corners of his wide mouth. "Makeshift. Our stage was

wrecked. Where's the Quincy House, 'Brother'?"

The man spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dust. He grunted, "Two blocks ahead, one to the right. Cain't miss it. It's just around the corner from the Elephant Corral."

Cole drove on, and at the designated corner, turned right. A huge, stable ringed corral on his right proclaimed itself to be the Elephant Corral, and across Wazee and north a ways, was another, nearly as large, which was the Gigantic. At the western end of the Gigantic Cole saw a small sign with the letters, "FO, DC & A" carelessly painted on it. Seeing no hotel, Cole swung right again on F street and halted his team before a cream-colored, false-fronted building over which the sign, "Quincy House" hung.

He caught Norah as she slid to the ground. He said, "What you need is about twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep. I'll go over what Mike's got in the meantime, but if all the rest is like what I've seen so far, I want no part of it and neither do you."

He sorted her baggage out and set it on the boardwalk. Schoonover jumped down off the pile of baggage and shook himself like a fat terrier emerging from water. "I'll be at the Planter's House," he said pompously. "Have my baggage sent there."

Cole murmured drily, "If you want a change of clothes before tomorrow, take it with you."

Schoonover started to protest, but Cole's steady glance upon him changed his mind. Grumbling, he sorted a bag from the pile and waddled up the street with it clutched in his hand.

Cole followed Norah into the hotel and set her bags down inside the door. Norah was at the desk in conversation with the clerk, a young man who lost no time in making himself agreeable. Cole backed out the door and mounted again to the buckboard seat. "Where you going to stay?" he asked Hobart.

Hobart shrugged. "Leave my stuff in the buckboard. I'll get it later."

THE GIGANTIC Corral, while not so large as the Elephant, nevertheless covered nearly two acres. The corral was formed by open-front sheds on three sides, by two gates and an auctioneer's platform on the fourth. At each of the two corners nearest the gates, stood small enclosed buildings, one of which, Cole guessed, was a tackroom, the other an office. In the exact center of the compound thus formed stood a long watering trough fed by a hand pump at one end. One of the sheds, fenced off by poles, contained loose, freshly cut hay.

There were buggies and buckboards, wagons and a welter of harness, but there were no coaches inside. Cole said, "Hell, the sign said..."

Hobart pointed. "The sign's down there."

Cole stared. Parked along the western side of the Gigantic were half a dozen Troy coaches, all in a sorry state of disrepair. A corral made of poles, roughly a hundred feet across, contained perhaps twenty horses. Between corral and coaches, stood a weathered tent, and before this, on a folding stool, sat a bearded man, a short pipe between his teeth.

Cole snorted disgustedly. "If Mike wasn't dead, I'd give him a cussing! I've run across some liars in my time, but Mike tops them all!"

"There's always the mines."

Cole pulled the buckboard toward the tent. Suddenly it lurched, and dropped. The horses started, but Cole held them in, cursing. The right rear wheel had come off the buckboard, putting the axle into the dirt. Cole called to the man before the tent, "Come and get it, my friend. It belongs to your broke-down stageline. Set my bags inside your tent, if you will, and I'll be obliged."

Without waiting to see if the man would comply, he jumped down and strode up the street, with Hobart hurrying to catch up.

For a block he walked in silence, fuming. Finally he asked, "Leaving for the mines right away?"

Hobart murmured in his easy drawl, "Ain't in too much of a hurry. A man ought to know where he's going before he leaves. But once he's in the water, he'd ought to swim."

"A sly dig."

"T'wasn't meant so. Could have been this man Forrest needed you so bad, he stretched the truth some. Strikes me that girl's going to need someone to look after her."

"You do it then. I keep thinking how bad she needs someone to spank her, though I doubt if I could keep my mind on spanking if I ever got her turned across my knee."

Hobart ignored the jest. He paused uncertainly at the intersection, staring up Blake toward the towering and imposing shape of the Planter's House, a block away. "I got me half a notion to pitch in an' give her a hand myself."

Cole stared. Suddenly he laughed. His laugh was harsh and caustic. Hobart stiffened angrily.

"If she was horsefaced and bony, would you feel the same way?"

Hobart's muscles bunched, but then he seemed to change his mind. He said, "Don't sneer at a man for the decent things he wants to do. I'm old enough to be that girl's father. I had a girl once that would be about her age if she'd lived."

Shame touched Cole but it did not soften him. He said, "I'm sorry. But there's little chance for anyone, bucking a big line with an outfit like Mike's. I've seen the big lines work too often. Forget that girl and go on to the mines. She's got a mail contract to bargain with. She'll sell out and go back east where she belongs."

Hobart toed the dust aimlessly. "Maybe you're right." Together they walked in silence the rest of the distance to the Planter's House.

NIGHT came down across this land, black velvet that began at the jagged peaks and rolled eastward. Lamps winked in windows, and tradesmen laid aside their tools. Workingmen plodded homeward and the saloons began to fill. A flurry of shots raced up the street from the McGaa street bridge followed by a ragged shout of pain.

Cole stood at his front window in the Planter's House and stared down into the street. A wagon loaded with logs, late arrived from the mountains, passed heading southeastward. Try though he would, Cole could not shake off his uneasy feeling of an obligation unfulfilled. Not more than an hour past, he had called at the Quincy House with the thought in him that he would give her his refusal, and be done with Mike's whipped and broken stageline once and for all. Norah, however, he was informed, was undoubtedly still sleeping, since no sound had issued from her room all afternoon. So he had left a note, brief but to the point. *"Sorry, but I can't see it. Get yourself a lawyer and use your mail contract to bargain with. But sell out. It's the only way you can come out with anything at all."*

He saw a woman approaching along Blake, and even in the semi-darkness there was something about her movements that reminded him of Norah Forrest. He experienced an unwilling feeling of guilt and shook it off angrily. Still watching, he saw her pass through a beam of light which fell across the walk, and relief touched him. "Dancehall girl," was his thought, for the woman's clothes were quite obviously not the sort Norah Forrest would wear.

He turned from the window. The sight of the dancehall girl had vaguely stirred him, had made him remember the one remedy always successful in curing him of moodiness, of too much fatigue; liquor and a woman, in that order, for in this as in all frontier towns, often a man needed the liquor

to make him forget that the woman was hard and coarse and faded.

Moved from his thoughts by vague anticipation, he took off his shirt and splashed vigorously in the tin basin on a table against the wall. Straightening, reaching for the towel, he heard a small, short knock against his door.

"Come in. He walked toward the door, scrubbing his face and chest with the towel. When the knock came again, stronger, he yanked open the door.

His mouth dropped open. For a moment he stared, then humor entered his eyes and touched the corners of his sombre mouth. With a towel-wrapped forefinger, he wiped soap from one of his ears.

"I saw you down in the street. I thought it looked like you, but decided it was not when I saw your clothes."

A flush crept up to stain Norah Forrest's too-pale cheeks. She asked, "May I come in?"

Mockery was in Cole's gray eyes. "It's improper for a lady to enter a gentleman's bedroom even in this god-forsaken wilderness. People will talk."

"Oh stop it! I want to talk to you. I got your note." She came in determinedly, but kept her eyes averted from his naked chest and its mat of fine hair. Cole took his shirt from the chairback and slipped it on deliberately, watching her. He asked, "Where the devil did you get that dress?"

"I borrowed it from a girl at the Quincy House."

"A dancehall girl."

"I didn't ask what her profession was."

"Was it that obvious?" Cole was grinning openly.

Norah stamped a small foot angrily. "I didn't come here to discuss my dress, nor a dancehall girl either."

"What did you come for?"

FOR A MOMENT he thought she would leave. Anger sparked dangerously in her deep-brown eyes. Her lips, which he remembered could be

so soft and inviting, were not so now. Her firm chin was uptilted and very slightly outthrust. Arrogance was plain in her, and the fact that she was not used to opposition and refusal.

But with an obvious effort, she controlled herself, even managed a tight little smile. "I came to thank you. You were very brave at the time of the wreck, and very considerate afterward."

Cole laughed outright at her obviously rehearsed speech. "And?"

"Oh stop it! You're insufferable!"

"But you'd like to change my mind?" Deliberately he let his glance drop from her face to the dress, sheer and revealing and tight-fitting, to her tiny waist, flat stomach, full-rounded hips. In spite of himself, he felt his pulses quickening, felt a lessening of his amusement.

"Yes I would. If you are afraid you would not be paid..."

Cole interrupted. "No. I've worked at staging all my life and I know what can be done and what can't. If you are careful, you can come out of it with several thousand dollars. Then you can go back East."

Norah's small chin set stubbornly. Anger again stirred in her eyes. "I'll do no such thing! Do you hear? I'll not go back beaten! If you were not so..." She paused, making a strong and determined effort to control herself.

"Cowardly?" Cole supplied, grinning.

"It was the word I had in mind. But perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps you are thinking in terms of money, and are waiting for me to make you a better offer than father did."

"It might be interesting, but it wouldn't make me change my mind."

"Would a half interest in the line—provided you win—interest you?"

Cole shook his head.

Pure desperation shone for a moment in Norah's eyes, and this was puzzling to Cole. She took a step closer to him, managed a smile, and

almost managed a provocative look. She asked softly, "Would I interest you?"

"Not if it comes as hard as all that." With complete suddenness the humor went out of Cole entirely. His hands reached out, caught her by the waist and drew her roughly against him. His head bent and his lips caught and held her own parted lips. For an instant she held herself rigid. Then quite obviously remembering that this had been her own suggestion, she softened, but it was only the softness of acquiescence. Still Cole crushed her against him, his lips bruising and hungry.

All at once Norah's body arched upward against his. Her arms crept around him and her fingers bit into his neck, the strength of her awakening demand in them.

Breathing harshly, Cole pushed her away, his eyes still hot. Norah searched his face, her expression wondering, and then she murmured, "You will help me then?"

Cole laughed mirthlessly. "No. The sort of thing you're trying to offer can be bought anywhere in Denver City for much less."

Norah stared at him as though he had struck her. Then, as the blood drained out of her face, her eyes took on a look of uncontrolled rage. Surprising him utterly, she sprang at him and her fists beat against his face. "You...! You...!" she screamed, apparently unable to find an epithet strong enough. "I might have known there wasn't a spark of decency in you!"

Cole caught and held her arms in a rigid, inflexible grasp. Her helplessness seemed to further infuriate her. "You've used the wrong word," he told her. "What you have suggested does not require decency."

The humor of this struck him now. He grinned down at her openly. "I have surprised myself tonight, but you did it so very badly. Now go on back to the Quincy House and dress your-

self like a lady. The first thing you ought to learn is to put the right label on your merchandise."

He had thought she was quite as angry as a woman could get. But now her eyes positively flashed. Reaching the peak of anger, there was nothing left for her, being a woman, but tears. They began in a mistiness over her eyes that deepened until tears welled from their corners.

Suddenly she whirled and fled from the room, slamming the door viciously behind her. Consciousness that it was growing late, that this girl, dressed as she was, might be accosted in the street, made Cole reach for his hat. But then he stopped and whirled the hat onto the bed, murmuring, "Heaven help the man that bothers her between here and the Quincy House. He'll think he's tied into a bobcat."

CHAPTER IV

TONIGHT I'LL HAVE ALL THREE

TWICE during Norah's block and a half walk to the Quincy House, did a man approach her, but both times, as Cole predicted, the uncontrolled anger in her stopped them uncertainly before they had more than opened their mouths to speak.

Norah could not remember ever having been so angry. "Oh, I hate that man! I hate him!" she repeated to herself over and over again.

But only partly was her anger directed at Cole Estes. Partly it was directed at herself, for she could not forget the way she had responded to his rough and insistent kiss, the way he had pushed her away as soon as he had aroused her.

She could forget neither her own words, "Then you will help me?" nor the tender, triumphant way she had spoken them.

Still, her own honesty was beginning to assert itself by the time she reached her room. She paused before the mir-

ror, gazing with growing distaste at the dress she wore, at her white, full breasts that were more than half exposed. She grew hot at the memory of his words, "Put the right label on your merchandise," and "What you're offering can be bought anywhere in Denver City for less."

He was no gentleman. He was at least not at all like the gentlemen she had encountered at school in the East, whom she easily controlled with an arched eyebrow, a mock frown. Though she did not know it, this experience, or lack of it, explained the youthful arrogance in her that was so irritating to Cole. Raised for the past ten years in an atmosphere where manners were emphasized more than courtesy, where the package was more important than the contents, she was only what they had made of her.

As she slipped out of the dress, she could not shake off the tarnished feeling that came over her. She flung the dress in a heap on the bed. "Darn him! Oh, darn him anyway!"

"What's the matter, honey? Didn't the dress do the business?" A girl came into the room, not bothering to knock, and Norah turned with startled surprise.

"Do you know what he said?" Norah asked indignantly.

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Go back to the hotel and dress like a lady. The first thing you ought to learn is to put the right label on your merchandise.'"

For an instant Norah's visitor stared. Then a smile began at the corners of her mouth, in her weary blue eyes. Suddenly she began to laugh. Tears coursed down her smooth and beautifully translucent cheeks. She gasped, "I'm sorry," and collapsed into a chair, still laughing. "He sounds like quite a man, honey. What's he look like?"

Now again anger stirred in Norah and her face took on an outraged imperiousness. The girl who sat laughing in such an unladylike position in

the big chair, was taller than Norah by a full two inches. Instead of Norah's lithe youthfulness, her body had the fullness, the roundness of a woman's body. Her dress was a prototype in shimmering green of the dress Norah had flung on the bed, its purpose being to reveal rather than to conceal the full promise of her body. Her hair, cascading to her shoulders, was a rich, copper red that caught the glow of lamplight and flung back almost metallic glints. "What's he look like?" she repeated.

"Oh, he's tall. He's...so darn superior!"

The girl, Sally Ambrook, murmured, "A good description. I could pick him out of any crowd after that. All men are superior, honey."

"Well, you'll probably see him, fighting, carousing around the place where you..." Norah flushed and muttered contritely, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." Sudden awareness came to her of what Sally Ambrook was—a dancehall girl—a "tarnished lady".

Sally straightened in her chair and got up. "Nothing to be sorry about, honey. It isn't too bad a life; except your feet get awfully tired."

"Your feet?" Norah's face showed her puzzlement. "I thought..."

"We dance with the customers, honey. That's all." Deep amusement lurked in Sally's eyes, but there was pity there too, and regret for Norah's sudden and terrible embarrassment.

"No wonder he finds it so easy to torment you, you poor kid. Now quit thinking and get to bed. You've had a tough time of it with your father and all. I've got to get to work or get fired."

Norah nodded dumbly, and watched as Sally moved gracefully to the door. When it closed behind her, Norah flung herself face downward on the bed, sobbing. A terrible feeling of loneliness oppressed her, like a leaden weight upon her spirits. This afternoon she had discovered, by a visit to Clark

Gruber and Co., her father's bank, the true awfulness of the stageline's position. Riddled with debt, owning only worn out equipment, the line had a mere three hundred dollars in the bank, less than enough for one week's operation.

Aware fully that her father had sent her money for years at the cost of stripping his business, an awakened sense of loyalty to Mike had sent her to seek out Cole Estes, prepared to offer herself if need be. Now, even this chance was gone before his coarse refusal.

She got up and blew out the lamp, removing the rest of her clothes in darkness. Then she flung herself upon the bed, sobbing into the pillow, and so fell asleep. But all through the night she was tortured by the recurring crash of the coach as it tumbled into the dry riverbed, by the awful sight of her father, whom she had seen not at all for three years, a crumpled and lifeless figure in the dust.

Another figure was in her dreams, Cole Estes, finding all her weaknesses with uncanny precision, and mocking her for them. Strangely, though, through all this his eyes were full of gentleness.

DENVER'S finest, the Gold Coin Saloon, was easily distinguishable by its sign, a four foot reproduction of one of Clark Gruber and Co's., privately minted twenty dollar gold coins, which bore the legend across the top, "Pike's Peak Gold," and a picture of a rather improbable mountain in the center, beneath which were the words "Denver" and "Twenty D".

The building itself was a towering two and a half story affair, festooned with scrollwork along its eaves and balcony. The tinkle of a piano, freighted from the east at prodigious cost and effort, came through its open doors, rising tinnily above the well-bred murmur of talk and merry-making.

Cole moved leisurely across the

thick-piled carpet and found himself a place at the long, elaborately carved bar between two groups of earnestly conversing men. The talk centered on the gold fields of the Vasquez, where, the previous year, Gregory had made his fantastic discovery.

"But what good are these gold fields doing either their discoverers or Denver City?" asked one of the men. "The miners are afraid to work more than enough to pay their bare expenses for fear of robbery. There is never a day passes on the Vasquez, or on the road between here and there, but what one or more men are waylaid and murdered for their gold."

The man beside Cole, a short-bearded, calm and thoughtful appearing man, replied without heat. "It is eventually going to become our responsibility to see that they have law and protection—if not law as we have known it in the East, then a committee of citizens who will track down these criminals and punish them. Sure-

ly you agree with that, General Larimer?"

"Then perhaps you will suggest such a possibility in your paper, Mr. Byers. I have talked that idea for months up and down the streets of Denver. Everyone agrees that it is necessary, but nobody does anything about it."

Cole brought the flat of his hand down on the bar with a resounding whack. Byers, next to him, started. A bartender, white-aproned and bearded, came toward him. Cole said, "I'm here to drink and not to talk. But I would make a bet that if I had a claim on the Vasquez, I would work it and heaven help the man who tried to rob me."

Byers said quietly, "You sleep like the dead after a day at a sluicibox. And in the dark, no man is a match for half a dozen."

Cole shrugged, but he was unconvinced. He poured a drink from the bottle which now sat before him and



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and... Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."



*Hair looks better...
scalp feels better...
when you check Dry Scalp*

HE TOOK HER TIP, and look at his hair now! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic can do as much for you. Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff... keep hair naturally good-looking. It contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. Gives double care to both scalp and hair... and it's economical, too!

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®

Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN,
starring JEAN HERSHOLT,
on CBS Wednesday nights.

downed it at a gulp. Anticipation was a fever in him. The odd feeling of tension, which he had felt so often before, was in his head and in the tightness of his muscles. There were things which could ease that tension. Liquor was one. A fight was another. A woman was a third. Cole thought, "Tonight I'll have all three."

A fiddler joined the piano player, and the two struck up a lively tune. Now the girls came down the stairs, hips swaying, eyes smiling. A murmur of appreciation rose from the crowd. Cole turned his head to watch the girls and felt a touch of surprise, for not one of them was over twenty-five, and while their eyes were too worldly, none was coarse, and none faded.

Their white skin gleamed softly in the light from a dozen glittering crystal chandeliers. Quick excitement touched Cole. He poured another drink and tossed it down. The liquor was warm in his stomach, and he felt a loosening of his muscles, coupled with a strong sense of well-being.

A MAN IN the group with Byers and Larimer chortled. "Man, will you look at that redhead!"

Cole looked. This one was tall for a woman and her hair was a copper red that appeared almost metallic in the soft light. Her eyes were a clear, smiling blue and her skin was beautifully smooth and almost transparent. She was dressed in clinging, shimmering green that showed the mature roundness of her body. Cole asked, "What's that one's name?"

Byers shrugged. "They are all alike to a man of my age."

Another man in the party snorted. "A man never gets too old for a pretty woman. Her name is Sally Ambrook. But don't get any ideas, my friend, because she dances with the customers and that is all."

"Then she'll dance with me," Cole murmured, and left the bar. He moved through the crowd and intercepted Sally Ambrook as she came off the

bottom step of the stairs. His eyes were friendly, but they also contained boldness, and a challenge.

"Will you dance this first one with me?" he asked. "After that, we will see, but I think you'll be dancing several with me tonight."

Her glance ran over him and her eyes quickened with involuntary interest. Wordless, she laid a soft hand on his arm and moved onto the polished dance floor with him.

Afterward they found a table and Cole ordered drinks from a white-jacketed waiter. Sally said, "So you are another of those who have come across the country to take a fortune in gold from the Vasquez?"

Cole shook his head. "I will take a fortune from somewhere, but it will not be from the bed of some stream."

Sally's glance was frankly interested. She asked, "How then?"

Cole shrugged. "I have not yet decided. But something will occur to me."

"There are too many men already in Denver and on the Vasquez waiting for something to occur to them. Usually what occurs to them is robbery and murder." Her disappointment in him was plain and put him immediately on the defensive.

"I am not one of those. What is mine is mine; and what belongs to another man is his. Robbery and murder are the tools of cowards."

The waiter brought their drinks, and Cole laid a gold piece on the waiter's tray. As the man made change, Sally murmured, "Already I have changed my mind twice about you. I hope I shall not have to change it again, because now I find myself liking you."

The waiter moved away, and Sally picked up her drink, set it aside and then picked up Cole's. "You do not mind? The drinks they serve me are only tea. Tonight I feel the need of something stronger."

She was watching Cole with an odd intentness, as though she were look-

ing for something in him, and could not quite decide whether she had seen it or not.

Cole saw her eyes widen, saw her mouth half open to speak. He became aware that her glance had left him and was now fixed on something behind him. The chill of warning traveled down Cole's spine, and he came smoothly out of his chair, moving to one side swiftly as he did so.

Even as he turned, he brought the chair around in front of him. All of this was instinctive in Cole, a defensive action. Now he raised the chair to waist level, a bit startled, and moved by half-recognition of the man who came at him in such a clumsy rush. The chairleg poked this man in his middle, but he slapped it aside with a long-reaching arm.

All at once Cole understood. This was the bearded and red-faced guard who had sat atop the Concord Oxbow, and across whose back Cole had laid his whip. Cole said, his mouth drawn into a tight grin which had no mirth in it, "I'm glad you found me, my stage-wrecking friend, because I think I owe you something."

BEHIND the Concord's guard stood a half circle of his cronies, grinning their anticipation, and now one of these said, "Break his arm, Jake. Mess up his face some so Sally won't even want to look at him."

Jake made no effort to hit Cole. He swayed on the balls of his feet, arms hanging at his sides. He was an enormous man, whose chest and belly were one, and made him appear top-heavy. His lips showed pink through the inky blackness of his beard. Abruptly and with confusing suddenness, Cole moved, striking out with a long-reaching left. Jake's head snapped back, and he took a step backward to retain his balance, but the force of the blow seemed not to affect him at all.

Cole followed with a right, his weight coming forward, and all the

force of his shoulder behind his fist. Jake's nose flattened and spurted bright blood. But the man only shook his head and swiped at his nose with a sleeve.

This blow threw Cole in close, and he felt the huge paws of his adversary close behind him in the small of his back. He heard a voice, "You got him now, Jake! Break his damned back!"

Cole heard Sally's stifled scream and became aware of the deathly silence that had fallen over the room. Jake's arms, as thick as an ordinary man's legs, tightened inexorably, and Cole felt himself being forced backward. Jake's face was close to his own, the man's breath reeking of whisky sourness and hot in his nostrils. Jake's lips were grinning, but it was only the grimace of physical exertion, and had no humor in it.

Panic touched Cole. He had seen men like Jake work before, and had seen the broken things that were left when the inhuman power of their muscles had done its work. This panic gave him a strength he did not think he possessed and for an instant he strained with all that was in him against the gradual and inexorable bending of his back. Throwing one last jerk into this effort, he felt himself come straight, his knees break their contact with Jake's.

Explosively, he brought a leg upward, smashing into the big man's groin, and he felt the fleeting looseness of Jake's grip, even as the grunt of pain broke from the man's lips.

Cole mustered all that was left of his strength and arched his back, twisting at the same time, and throwing his arms between himself and Jake to add further leverage. He felt himself break away, and stumbled backward, falling. He rolled even as he fell, and came smoothly to his knees, cocking his head and squinting upward. He saw Jake diving at him, and drove himself upward. He felt the softness of Jake's belly, felt also the man's clutching hands. Cole grunted,

"Oh no! Not again. You won't get your damned hands on me again," and came to his feet, his fists lashing out, driving Jake away from him by their very force and regularity.

He panted, "Every man to his own style of fighting. Now I'm going to cut you to pieces. I'll wear you down if I can't do anything else."

Again Jake stood, apparently completely relaxed, and his arms were loose and swinging slightly at his sides. Cole leaped in, and snapped his head back with a left, following again with his viciously uppercutting right. Jake only stepped back and shook his head. Cole moved in again, darting back after each blow. He thought, "It's like hitting a stone wall. I'll break my hands on him and I still won't put him down."

So he put his attention on Jake's eyes, bloodying the brows until the blood ran into Jake's eyes, blinding him. Helplessly, Jake swiped at his eyes with his sleeve. A voice yelled, "Get your hands on him, Jake! You don't have to see him to break him up!"

Cole was circling, and Jake was stupidly trying to follow his sure-footed and lightning maneuvers. A man said hoarsely, "Quit runnin' from him, you slug! *Fight!*"

This voice came from behind him, and at the same instant he heard Sally's scream, felt the force of two hands in his back, shoving him violently toward Jake. Caught off balance by this unexpected push, he staggered forward, fighting desperately for balance. At the last instant, he threw himself aside, but it was too late. He fell against Jake, heard the man's gloating grunt of triumph and felt the awful strength of the enormous hands upon his arm.

Excruciating pain laced along the arm as it bent under the tremendous pressure. Cole felt it crack, and blindness rose before his eyes in nauseous waves. His head was bursting with the pound of blood, of effort. But through

this half unconsciousness, he heard a voice, "Drop him, Jake! Damn you, if you want to brawl, do it over at the Criterion! I'll have none of it here!"

He was conscious of Jake's release of his arm, of falling. Then, as he fell, Jake's heavy boot swung out viciously, connecting with the side of his head, blotting out entirely all feeling, all consciousness of the indignant murmur of voices that filled the huge room.

CHAPTER V

MEN WILL BE KILLED

AS THE fight had started, Sally Ambrook had half risen from her chair, filled with consternation, and with fear for the newcomer, Cole Estes. Jake Rupp, in the short time since he had arrived in Denver City, had made a reputation for brutality, and this reputation was built upon the broken bones of lesser men.

Realizing then though that there was little a woman could do in a thing like this, she sat back again, but tenseness filled her and she watched with widened eyes and with increasing horror.

The more respectable element in the place moved away from the fight, with no eagerness in them to watch these two beat each other into insensibility, but there was another element which moved in, making a circle about the combatants, eventually shutting off Sally's view. She stood up, and became aware of a tall man, elegantly dressed, who now stood beside her. This was John Marple, owner of the Gold Coin. He was perhaps forty-five, his sideburns streaked with gray. He wore a short, carefully trimmed beard and a small mustache.

His voice carried no warmth at all as he spoke. "This fight is over you, Sally?"

She shook her head. "Jake started it. There was something said about a wrecked stagecoach."

Marple's eyes, never warm, were now exceedingly cold. He muttered, "Damn him! I've warned him." He shouldered his way through the ring of spectators. Sally, following, felt a touch of sickness. Rupp had succeeded in closing with Cole, and had his arm in the grip of two big hands. Sally saw the agony on Cole's straining face. She touched Marple's arm. "Stop it! Please stop it!"

"You like this stranger?"

Sally nodded. "Hurry!"

Marple stepped close to Jake. His hand, flat, came against Jake's bearded face, and his voice, sharp and commanding, snapped the words that Cole had heard.

Jake turned eyes that were somehow clouded and blank, toward Marple. Marple repeated sharply, "*Drop him!*"

Jake released Cole's arm, and Cole slumped to the floor. The kick Rupp gave him was a last spiteful gesture of defiance toward Marple. Marple murmured, "Someday I'll put a bullet into that stupid head of yours." Sally looked at Jake Rupp, and an involuntary shudder ran through her. His eyes were nearly closed from the pounding of Cole's fists, his nose was splattered against his face and flattened. The whole front of his beard and shirt was speckled with blood and froth. Marple's voice, still sharp, said, "Get out of here and don't come back!"

Jake snarled, "I'll kill him!"

"Not in here, you won't, because you won't be in here any more."

For a moment the eyes of the two men locked. Slowly the passion went out of Jake's heavy-featured face. His eyes dropped. "All right," he growled. Marple turned away, facing Sally. His eyes lost some of their hardness, though there was no tangible relaxing of his expression. "Now what?"

Oblivious of the crowd around her,

Sally murmured, "He should have a doctor. His arm may be broken."

Resignation showed in Marple's face. He shrugged. "It is one after another, isn't it Sally? Each one is different, and you think you see what you are looking for in all of them—for a time. But it always turns out badly for you. They're weak, or they're cruel, or they're just plain bad. Is there never anything in me for you to want?"

"I can't help myself, John."

"All right. Go get the doctor. I'll have him sent upstairs."

Sally's voice was small and a little ashamed. "I'm sorry, John."

He gave her a twisted grin. "When will you learn that all men are alike? There is good in us all and bad as well. If you find gentleness in a man, you will find weakness with it. If you are looking for strength, you will find cruelty too. What is it you want, Sally?"

Exasperation touched her because he had found the core of her own uncertainty. She countered with a question of her own, "What do you want, John?"

"You. Just as you are with no changes at all."

"But why me? What is it that you see in me that you cannot see in another woman?"

He shrugged. "I have all the answers except that one and I won't give you empty flattery because that isn't what you want. I don't know, Sally. What a man sees in the woman he wants is too intangible to explain satisfactorily."

Sally turned, and started for the door, but from the corner of her eye, she saw a man bending over Cole, gently feeling his arm from which the sleeve had been cut away. She paused, recognizing the man, and went to stand beside him. "Is it broken?" she asked.

He grunted without looking up. "Just got here. Can't tell you yet."

SALLY HEARD the music start, and felt the thinning of the crowd about her. Again the low murmur of conversation filled the room. A couple of Marple's waiters hovered a yard away, waiting. Sally said, "Would it be easier to examine him upstairs?"

"Of course it would," the doctor said testily.

Sally nodded to the waiters and they stooped, lifting Cole easily. Sally walked beside them, steadying Cole's arm, watching his face all this time. John Marple's words were alive in her memory, and some of the weariness returned to her eyes. She told herself, "You have lived too much and have seen too much. What John says is true. The man you are looking for does not exist. You are clinging foolishly to a young girl's dream."

But her eyes, steady and soft on Cole's relaxed face, would not acknowledge her mind's reasoning. After they had laid him down on the silken-covered bed, she continued to watch him while the Doctor probed at the arm, and at last she murmured, half trying to convince herself, "It will be different this time. It will be different because he is different."

Cole jerked, and sat up, and his injured arm came about with a brushing sweep that caught Dr. Fox in his chest and knocked him sprawling on the floor. Fox got up and said irritably, "The fight is over, so you can lay back and let me finish examining you."

Cole looked at him blankly for a moment, then at Sally, then at the luxuriously furnished room. He made the slightest of grins, saying, "If you weren't here, Doc, I'd think this was heaven. But the angels don't look as grumpy and sour as you do. Is it broken?"

"No. But the muscles are torn and the elbow's dislocated. I'll put it back in, but you'll do no more fighting for a week or so."

Cole murmured, "All right."

The doctor took hold of his hand

and wrist. "It'll hurt. Lay back and brace your feet against the foot of the bed."

Cole grunted, "It hurts now."

"It feels good compared to what it's going to feel like." He put a steady pressure against Cole's wrist. "It's time they ran Jake Rupp out of town. There's hardly a night I don't have to set a bone he's broken."

Anger set Cole's jaw rigidly. "I'll run him out of town, Doc. I'll do that much for you."

Fox snorted, and laid back against the pull of Cole's arm. A long sigh escaped Cole's lips, and the muscles of his face strained and twisted.

Sally snatched his free hand in both of hers and buried her face against them. She heard Dr. Fox's brusk, "There. Give it a chance to heal before you go looking for Rupp again, will you?"

Cole's voice was unnatural. "All right."

Sally heard the door close, but she did not raise her head.

Cole said, "This has not been the evening I planned for us."

Sally brought her glance up, and there was a mistiness across her vision. She took her hands from his and rose. Cole swung his feet over the side of the bed and sat up. Sally came back with a woolen shawl, and made a sling for his arm. Stooping to tie it, her flaming, fragrant hair brushed across Cole's face. She stepped back. "There."

Cole stood up unsteadily and this movement put him close to her, his face inches from hers. Sally felt a trembling expectancy, an almost girlish excitement. Her eyes held this youthfulness, this wonder, this pleading, as she looked into his.

Cole's good arm went around her and drew her against him. Sally murmured, "Your arm..." but she did not draw away. His head came down and his lips found hers, which were soft and warmly eager. Molten fire ran in Sally's veins and she rose on

tiptoes, pressing herself against him. Suddenly conscious of his injured arm, she drew back and whispered, "Your arm. I forgot your arm."

"The devil with my arm!" Cole's voice was hoarse.

Sally smiled. Her soft hands went up and cupped his hard jaw. "Be careful when you leave," she pleaded. "I do not want you hurt again." She could see the cooling of his eyes, and her heart cried out, "I want you to stay! Oh, I want you to stay, but can't you see? You mustn't think I am like the others, or you will not come back!"

She murmured, "I'll see you again?"

He smiled at her and the smile took from his face all of its sombre moodiness, and made it pleasant and warm. "You will; of course you will. And thank you." He looked at her for a moment more, then turned and opened the door. Sally watched his broad back from the doorway until he had turned around a bend in the stairway and disappeared from her view.

Now deep depression settled over her. She thought, "He is not like the others, but he will not come back." Some inner knowledge told her. "You cannot hold a man by holding yourself away from him," but she argued this fiercely and said softly aloud, "If I were easy for him, he would wonder if I were not easy for every other man as well."

Never yet had Sally given herself to any man, but tonight she would have given herself eagerly to Cole. The thought kept running through her head, "He must be the one, because never before have I felt this way."

Deeply disturbed, she brushed her hair and went again down the heavily carpeted stairs.

WITHOUT pausing, Cole went through the crowded Gold Coin, and into the crispness of this August evening. The shawl Sally had slung his arm in exuded a faint fragrance that stirred his senses, and brought

her likeness vividly before his mind.

With his free hand, his right, he fished in his pocket for tobacco, but realizing that he could not use it one-handed, he tossed it disgustedly into the street. Anger began to stir in him, anger that increased as he thought of the fight. He stopped at a tobacco shop and bought half a dozen cigars, lighting one at the door of the shop awkwardly.

Then he continued northeastward along Blake. Reaching the corner of F & Blake, he paused, puffing moodily on the cigar and staring downstreet at the cream front of the Quincy House. A tall, clumsily moving figure approached him from that direction, and presently, Cole recognized the man as Hobart. Hobart was hurrying, but when he saw Cole, he halted abruptly.

"I've been looking for you!" he panted.

"Why?"

"It's Norah Forrest. Some lawyer's down there trying to talk her into selling the stageline. I thought..."

"You thought I'd talk her out of it. Well, I won't."

"You were a friend of her father's. You ought to go down there—at least help her to get the best kind of deal she can."

Cole shrugged. "All right. I'll do that much. No use in letting them steal it from her."

He walked in the direction of the Quincy House, forced to hurry to keep up with Hobart. Hobart told him jerkily, "I took on a job working for her, but I doubt if I'll do her much good. I'm a farmer."

Cole felt a touch of obscure anger. "You'll do her no good at all. Why couldn't you keep your blamed..." He closed his mouth and lifted his shoulders resignedly. "Babes in the woods," he thought. "They'll be broke in a month if they try to stay in this business."

There was a small office in the lobby of the Quincy House, situated between the desk and the outer wall.

The door stood ajar, and it was toward this door that Hobart led him. As they entered, a man rose, graying, slim, a short man, whose smile contained the professional unctuousness of an undertaker. He smiled, and nearly managed to cover the fact that he was irritated. "Ah, Mr. Hobart," he said, and, looking at Cole, "I expect you are Mr. Estes. Miss Forrest spoke of you as having been a friend of her father's."

COLE TOOK the lawyer's hand. Norah stared at Cole's injured arm, plainly thinking, "So you have been brawling?" She murmured, "Mr. Thurston is representing the Illinois Central and Kansas Territory, and wants to buy out father's stageline."

Thurston raised a hand, palm outward. "Pardon me, Miss Forrest. Not the stageline. Only the mail contract, and the franchise between Denver City and Leavenworth."

Suddenly Norah rose. Her face was white, and Cole could see the utter weariness in her. But her chin was firm and her glance steady. "No. My answer is no. You couldn't even wait until my father's body was cold before you started your grab for what had been his, could you? Do you know that the people that hire you murdered my father and tried to murder me?"

Thurston's face assumed the expression one uses with an erring child. "An accident, Miss Forrest."

Norah clenched her fists. "We'll see what the authorities have to say about that!"

"There are no authorities."

"But they shot my father!"

"Did you see it happen? There are Indians on the plains, Miss Forrest. It must have been the Indians."

Cole felt a stir of pity for Norah, so overmatched in this contest. But Norah had not finished. She cried, "Get out of here! Tell them I'll go broke before I sell to them! Father sent me money for years, money he

could not afford. He stripped his business so that I could have everything I wanted. I didn't know it then. I know it now. Do you think I'll sell out his life's blood to the same murderers who killed him?" Her voice rose in pitch. Pure admiration sent a tingle down Cole's spine. He caught Thurston by a skinny elbow. "You hear all right, don't you, friend? She said git."

Thurston snatched up his bag and scurried angrily out the door. Cole breathed, "You sure know how to say no. There's little doubt in him about that."

He turned his glance to her, but the magnificence that had been in her a moment ago, was gone. She sank back into her chair and there was hopelessness in the sag of her shoulders. She put her head down into her hands and sobbed, "What am I going to do now?"

Hobart made a step toward her, but Cole said, "Wait a minute." He was thinking of the words in Mike's letter, "A chance to start a line to the Vasquez," and he was thinking, too, of the conversation he had overheard in the Gold Coin earlier this evening.

Up to now he had seen no hope for Mike's stageline, but coupling the two things in his mind had started a whole new train of thought. He said, "Miss Forrest, if I were to take on the job of trying to pull this stageline out of the hole it's in, would you back me up, or would you buck me all the time?"

She looked up. Tears blurred her eyes, but she was not crying now. There was sudden hope in her eyes that made Cole feel ashamed. She murmured, "You could do it your way."

"All right. I'll see if you mean that. Tomorrow I'm going to the IC & KT and tell them you've changed your mind. What did they offer you?"

Norah hesitated, seemed about to protest, but then she said, "Three thousand."

"I'll hold out for five." He watched

her closely for a moment. Surprise touched his tone as he asked, "You're not going to give me an argument about this?"

WORDLESSLY she shook her head. Again admiration stirred in Cole. "Then I'll tell you what I've got in mind. At present, there's no stage running between here and the Vasquez. The miners are afraid to work their claims more than enough to pay their bare expenses for fear of robbery and because there is no way for them to send their gold to Denver. Your present run between here and Leavenworth is going to have to be given up anyway, because you can't hold it without thousands to throw into its defense. They'll drive you clear out in a month if they put their minds to it."

"Then why do they offer to buy at all?"

"Because if they force you out, there might be a stink. You could go to the Kansas Legislature, who granted the franchise, and you could go to the Postoffice Department, who gave you the mail contract. They figure that three thousand is a pretty small amount to get you out without a squawk, and it is. If the franchise and contract aren't worth ten thousand, they aren't worth a dime."

He waited a moment for her to speak, and when she did not, went on, "Five thousand will give you something to work on for a while. It'll buy men to ride guard on the Vasquez run. And more than that, it will be making them pay for something you know you have to give up anyway."

Hobart interjected, "But is there enough money in a short run like that to make it pay?"

Cole grinned at him. "If you had a claim you could take a hundred dollars a day out of, but you knew the chances were at least even you'd be killed for it before you could send it out, how much would you pay to get

it safely to Denver? Five percent? Ten? Twenty-five?"

Hobart whistled. "Plenty."

"So will they. We'll charge them ten percent. We'll show the toughs we can be tougher than they can. And we'll be fighting the IC & KT with their own money, because when they see what we're doing with the Vasquez run, they'll sure as hell want to horn in."

Norah sat upright, her eyes sparkling. In this moment, her arrogance was entirely gone, and the way she looked at Cole, the way life returned to her, gave him a warm feeling of strength and confidence.

But experience had taught him that no venture, particularly one in which your antagonists were strong and well-organized, was easy. He cautioned, "It's dangerous. Men will be killed. But it might work. It just might work."

Norah came across the room and put a hand on Cole's arm. She said, "I have changed my mind. I will sell and go back east. There is nothing important enough to me to have men killed for it, and I know father would have felt the same."

Cole said, "Every day, or nearly every day, some miner on the Vasquez is murdered for his gold. Nothing worthwhile is ever done by evading a fight. If the miners stop carrying gold themselves, the toughs will let them alone and concentrate on us. But there is a difference. We will be ready and a match for them."

Hobart added his assurances to Cole's, and at last Norah was convinced. Cole put his hand on the door. He said, "Good night," and went out. His mind was busy with the riddle that was Norah Forrest. He had seen only her shallowness at first, but now he was beginning to see other things as well, things that come out only under the pressure of adversity. He thought, "Mike would have been proud of her tonight."

CHAPTER VI

THE CITIZEN'S COMMITTEE

A DOZEN miles west of Denver City, lying between the long, ridged hogback and the hills that marched away toward the divide, stood a new building, called the Mount Vernon House. Built of native, cream-colored sandstone, it served as postoffice, roadhouse, general store and saloon, and lay beside the "Ute Trail", where it entered the dark, winding Apex canyon on its way to the Vasquez.

Lamps winked from its windows as Fritz Woerner and Edgar Pense mounted their horses at the corral. Fritz yanked his cinch tight with unnecessary violence. "Gott damn it, Ed, I tell you it's shorter if you go south an' break through the Hog Back Mountain there."

Ed Pense shrugged. "All right. You go that way. I'll go the other. I'll bet you a bottle of the best 'rot' in Denver that I beat you in. Mind you though, if your hoss is sweated up, the bet's off. I'll meet you at the Gold Coin."

Fritz Woerner swung into his saddle. "It's a bet." He was a short man, roundly built without being fat. The hairs of his beard were stiff and stood straight out, this giving him a look of almost ludicrous fierceness. His eyes were a pale, washed-out blue.

He swung away at a trot, heading south. There was no road here, just the tall grass that swished against his horse's legs. The deep-bright stars above afforded only a small amount of light, and Fritz let the deep-chested bay pick his own trail.

Disgust with this country was a thing deeply rooted in Fritz. Full of hope, early this spring, he had come west with the rush and had since tramped the Vasquez, Chicago Creek, had even crossed the vast expanse of South Park. He'd found, where there

was gold, all of the claims taken. Elsewhere he found no gold. Finally, broke, he went to work as a miner for day wages that hardly paid more than his expenses. But out of this, he had saved enough for the bay horse, enough for slim provisions along the tedious ride back home.

Now the land began a long, steep slope, and after another thirty minutes, Fritz came to a rushing, turbulent stream where it broke through a monstrous gap in the long, seemingly endless ridge called Hog Back Mountain.

Here the way was narrow between the steepness of rocky ridge and roily water. And here it was darker. Suddenly a shot blossomed in the blackness ahead and a voice rang out, thickly accented and touched with madness. "Get back, you murderin' thieves! Followed me, did you? Well, you got it all and there's none left!"

Fritz reined about frantically in this pitch dark. But the voice faded into mumbling nothingness, and there were no more shots. Behind a jutting shoulder of yellow limestone, Fritz paused, thinking, "If I go back and take the other way, Ed will beat me in and it will cost me the price of a bottle." He squinted up at the rocky steepness of Hog Back Mountain and muttered, "A full half hour it will take to climb over that."

Experimentally, he shouted, "I dunno who you are, friend, but I want nothing you have. I'm travelin' this way because of a bet that it is shorter than the other, and you delaying me is going to cost me the price of a bottle."

He got no answer. An odd tingle, partly fear, partly superstition traveled down his spine. He began to wonder if this had not been imagination. Trembling, but determinedly, he reined his horse again into the defile. Its hooves rang loud against the crumbling rock along the trail. Twice in a hundred yards, panic almost controlled

Fritz, and both times he reined the horse to a halt, but did not turn around. At last he came out onto the plain, and it was here, in brighter starlight, that he saw the horse, a dim shape against the relative lightness of the plain.

The animal appeared to drowse, not bothering to graze, but as he neared, Fritz could see that he was saddled, could see his reins trailing. Very tempted to spur out onto the plain, Fritz controlled himself and called cautiously, "Man, are you hurt? Do you need help?"

His voice, unnaturally loud, echoed back from the walls of the defile, from the sheer steepness of the ridge across the creek. But Fritz got no answer.

He rode to the drowsing horse, and the animal lifted its head, staring at him without interest. Close like this, Fritz could see all the evidences of hard riding on this animal, from the dried sweat-foam that covered him, to the utter weariness that kept him match, and cupped its flickering flame

rooted to this spot, uninterested even in the lush, drying grass that surrounded him.

Fritz thought, remembering the strange words, "Now what would I do was I bein' chased, and rode through here?" Looking back toward the defile, he saw a huge rock that had broken from the rim ages past and rolled to the bottom. He murmured, "I'd git me behind that rock."

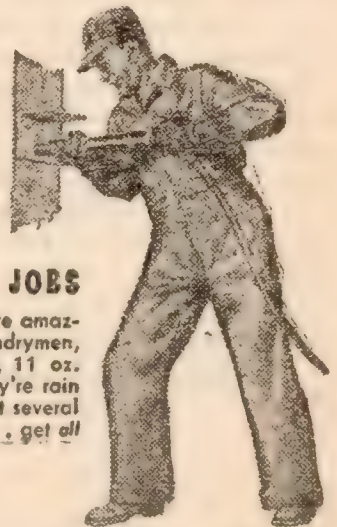
Dismounting, he advanced cautiously. But not until he was a scant ten feet from the rock, did he see the elongated, prone shape of a man behind it. He called, softly, but with the hoarseness of his fear, "Now don't start shootin', mister. If you'd like to get to Denver City I reckon I kin help you."

No movement stirred the man. Fritz advanced further, and at last could kick the rifle that lay beside the man out of his reach. Now he breathed a little easier. He knelt, and turned the man over. Turning bold, he struck a above the stranger's face.



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Blood ran from the three inch gash from the man's temple, and had dried a swollen, purpled pulp, and one of his eyes was completely swelled shut.

and clotted in his beard. His lips were

Feeling a stickiness on his hand, Fritz examined it, found it covered with thickened blood. He struck another match, held it higher, and found the stranger's right sleeve red and thoroughly soaked. Now, Fritz dropped his head and laid an ear against the man's chest. A slow, steady heartbeat brought him instantly to his feet. He said aloud, "You'll bleed to death if that ain't stopped. I'll need a fire to see by. Wonder if they're still after you, or if you got away?"

Taking this chance, he kindled a fire from dead and dry twigs he gathered, then cutting away the unconscious man's sleeve with his knife. A bullet had smashed the bone, had torn a two-inch ragged hole when it came out. But the bullet had missed, miraculously, any arteries. Fritz tore strips from a blanket he found tied behind the man's saddle and bound them about the arm. Then he led the stranger's horse over. He hoisted the limp body onto it, tying feet and uninjured arm beneath the animal's belly, the man's belt to the saddle horn.

Holding the reins of the led horse in his hand, he mounted and set out across the rolling plain toward Denver City.

He should, perhaps, have been thinking of this life he had saved. Instead, he was thinking with characteristic thriftiness, "I'll tell Ed the bet is off. By Gott, he can't hold me to it." But there was no conviction in him. Ed would say, grinning wickedly, "Pay up. I got here first, didn't I?"

JOHAN MARPLE was at first irritated when they brought the bleeding, dirty miner into the Gold Coin. But quickly seeing that perhaps this would afford a chance to unify sentiment in Denver City behind a Vigilante movement, he ordered two tables brought

together, and had the man laid there while the grumbling doctor, roused from his bed, worked feverishly over him.

Standing in the forefront of the circle about the makeshift operating table, John Marple, tall and without emotion, asked, "Anybody know him?"

He looked closely at the man on the table. The stranger was tall, nearly as tall as John himself. Bearded and badly beaten, there was still a certain handsomeness to his craggy features. The throng stirred and a voice, far behind him, said in thick Germanic accents, "Let me through. Let me look at him."

John turned and saw a perspiring, clean-shaven fat man trying to force his way through the crowd. He called, "Let me through," and as the fat man came out of the press of bodies, Marple asked, "Know him, friend?"

The fat man approached to the doctor's shoulder and looked down. Then he turned. "You are blamed right I know him. I should know him. I played with him as a boy in the old country. His twelve year old son is up in my hotel room right now."

Marple asked, "Who is he?"

Apparently not hearing, the fat man asked indignantly, "What kind of a country is this anyway? George Osten is an honest, hard-working man. He had a claim on the Vasquez that he's been putting fifteen hours a day to working. You want to know why? Because his family is still in Germany. He has not seen them for five years, and George Osten is a man who loves his family. All that five years he has worked, he and the boy, trying to make enough money to send for them, the wife and the other four children. But it is no good. He does not speak English too good, and can only take jobs which pay him a little bit. His wife gets sick and cannot work and the money he sends goes for food.

"Then comes the gold rush. George tells me, 'It is chance to make enough

to send for them', and he made enough. He had it when he started for Denver. But he does not have it now."

A LOW GROWL arose from the packed crowd. The fat man, red of face and perspiring freely, shouted, "Somebody else have it now. Somebody maybe right here in this room." He stabbed an accusing finger at random. "Maybe you. Maybe you."

The men he had singled out flushed and started forward, but John Marple put himself in their way. He said, "He's naming no names. He's trying to tell you that we ourselves don't even know the men who are robbing us."

A voice from the crowd called, "Then let's find out. Let's find out an' string 'em up!"

John opened his mouth to speak, but halted as he felt a light touch on his arm. The doctor, gruff and sour, whispered, "No use in me stayin' any longer. He's dead."

Marple said, "All right, Fox. All right, Doc." He raised his voice. "Doctor Fox says the man is dead. We've been talking law for a long time now. Are we going to keep talking or are we going to do something?"

It started as a murmur that swelled in seconds to a roar. Marple raised a hand. "I am not proposing mob rule. That is worse than no law at all. What I am proposing is that a committee of citizens be formed, citizens about whom there is no doubt whatever. When a crime is committed, they, or a posse selected by them, will ride until they catch the culprits. A trial will be held. The guilty will be executed, the innocent will go free."

"I'm for it, John!"

"Me too. Le's git busy."

The fat man made himself heard above the uproar, climbing clumsily to a chair. "That will not help him," he shouted indignantly. "What am I to tell his boy?"

John caught the man's arm and

pulled him down. He said, "Osten will be avenged. If it is possible, his son will have his money."

Again he raised his voice, and it carried the length and breadth of the room "Drinks are on the house. While you're drinking, talk over your selections for the members of the Citizen's committee. Then we'll vote. Where's the man that brought Osten in?"

He saw the short, round man with the bristling beard and pale blue eyes coming out of the throng. With the feel of his success strong within him, John Marple could still think, "It is a good thing, this law by the people. But for a while it will be over-zealous and the innocent will suffer with the guilty."

He asked, "Where did you find this man?"

"South of the Mount Vernon House where the creek breaks through Hog Back Mountain."

"Then we'll send out a posse in the morning with an Indian tracker. If anyone knows anything that might help, it is his duty to report it. We will let these toughs know that it will be harder from now on."

He glanced up and saw Sally Ambrook on the balcony. She was watching him in an odd way that made him feel self-conscious. He dropped his glance and moved out of the crowd and about his business. He had lighted the fire. It would burn now, without him.

CHAPTER VII

RIDE OUT, STRANGER!

COLE ESTES walked into the offices of the IC & KT Express at eight in the morning. A graying, sharp-featured man with spectacles came toward him from behind a long counter. Cole said, "Jess Dyer still run this outfit?"

The clerk nodded. Cole asked, "Is

he here yet?" and when the clerk again nodded, Cole said, "Tell him Cole Estes is here."

The clerk shuffled to a door on the far side of the room, stuck his head inside and mumbled something unintelligible. Then he turned. "He says to come on in."

Cole went into the inner office and closed the door. A man rose from behind a desk, a man grown fat with success, and gave him a genial smile, waving him toward a chair with his cigar. But Cole noticed today as he had often noticed before, that Jess Dyer's smile was a mere habitual contortion of his facial muscles. His eyes remained as cold and hard as polished quartz.

Dyer boomed, "Cole, blame your eyes, what you doin' 'way out here? Haven't seen you for years—not since, let's see, '56 wasn't it?"

Cole nodded. He said, "You haven't changed. It looks like you'd let a man like Mike Forrest alone, seeing as he worked for you for nearly fifteen years."

Dyer guffawed. "Business, my boy. Business. Never let the opposition get their breath."

"Did you know your toughs murdered him?"

The smile left Dyer's face. "Don't get smart with me, boy."

Cole shrugged. After a moment he said, "I came out here to give Mike a hand, but you beat me to him. Now his daughter's here, as you know. Last night she turned down your offer for her franchise and mail contract. I talked her into accepting it."

The geniality, the surface geniality returned to Jess Dyer. "Fine. Fine, my boy. You won't regret it."

Cole finished, "At a slightly altered figure." He let his eyes rest deliberately on Dyer's and they were cool and penetrating and contained a certain challenge.

The smile left Dyer's face. His eyes turned shrewd. He asked, "What figure?"

"Five thousand."

Dyer appeared to consider. "And she'll leave the country?"

"She likes it here. Are you afraid she'll hang Mike's killing on you?"

"I told you once not to get smart with me, Cole. Remember it."

Cole felt his anger stirring. He said, "I've got a few thousand saved. I'm stubborn enough and mean enough to throw it into her line and take a whack at beating you."

"I'll break you."

"Sure. But it'll cost you a hell of a lot more than five thousand to do it."

Dyer shrugged and smiled reluctantly. "All right. You win. Five thousand it is." He went to the door, shouted, "Childs. Bring in those contracts—and five thousand in cash."

Cole said softly, "Gold."

Dyer yanked his head around and scowled. "You drive a damned hard bargain." But he shouted into the outer room, "Gold."

Cole said, "Miss Forrest is waiting in the lobby. I'll get her."

"Damned sure of yourself, weren't you?"

Cole nodded. Dyer stared for a moment, and then he laughed. "How'd you like to work for me again?"

"Isn't Jake Rupp tough enough for you?"

Jess Dyer snorted, and for the first time seemed to notice Cole's injured arm. Looking at it, he said, "Tough enough, but not smart enough. Go get this girl. Cole, and when we've finished with her, we'll talk."

COLE BROUGHT Norah Forrest into the office, with a final caution, "Take his money and sign the contracts and let it go at that."

Jess handed over the contracts, and a heavy, small canvas sack of gold coin. While Norah signed the contracts, Cole counted the money. Satisfied, he leaned back in his chair. Norah was reading the contracts and she turned to him with a puzzled air. "It says we must abandon the run be-

tween Denver City and Leavenworth, but..."

Cole said quickly, "That part's all right. They're buying the franchise."

He took the contracts from her and read them through. Satisfied, he said, "They're all right. Wait for me in the lobby and we'll go over to the bank with the money."

Norah gave him a sober glance, but she went out silently. Cole closed the door behind her. "What did you want to say to me?"

"About that job..."

Cole interrupted. "Jess, now that I've got the money for that girl, I'm going to tell you something. I liked Mike Forrest, and I like his girl. I have never liked you and I don't like monopoly. You're going to pay for killing Mike. I'm going to see that you do pay for it."

Now the full hardness of Jess Dyer's character showed itself. His eyes narrowed until they were mere glittering slits. He chewed his cigar for a moment and stared hard at Cole. Finally he said softly, "You've pulled a fast one, haven't you boy? You've got me to pay for something you were going to have to abandon anyway." He blew a cloud of smoke into Cole's face, saying, "Get out of the country, Cole, get out while you're still alive."

Cole beat down the anger that boiled in his head. He rose. "You have played at being God for so long you think you are God. You order a man killed and he gets killed. But you're only a man, Dyer. You can die as easily as any other man. Remember that."

He lifted the sack of gold from the desk. But before he went out, he spoke again. "This is a new country, where every man has an equal chance. There are no entrenched interests, no monopolies. There are a lot of men, like myself, who will fight to see that none get established. Keep Jake Rupp off my neck, Dyer, or you'll be looking for a new bully boy."

He closed the door behind him and

stepped out through a side door into the lobby of the Planter's House. Norah Forrest rose and came toward him and the anger on his face seemed to give her reassurance. Cole asked, "Doubting?"

She dropped her eyes. "A little."

Cole said, "He offered me a job."

Arrogance flickered across Norah's face. She began, "Of course, if you..." but Cole interrupted, grinning wickedly, "You going to fire me already?"

"No, but..."

Again Cole interrupted. "I made my decision last night. I didn't want to start a fight that was useless, that there was no chance of winning. There is a chance of winning this one. But you'll need more faith in me than you've got now, because I'm going to do some things you won't like."

For half a block she walked beside him in silence. Finally she asked, her tone rising, "Why can't people let each other alone? Why does there always have to be fighting and killing?"

Cole shrugged, having no ready answer for this. But he said, "There will be a sort of law here before too long. Vigilante law."

"And that will mean more killing."

"It will. It may mean the deaths of men who are innocent. But there is one failing found in law as you and I know it that is not found in Vigilante Law. It does not discriminate against a man because he had no money or no influence. It does not favor the rich."

THEY CAME to the bank, and Cole followed Norah inside, introduced her and waited while she deposited the money to the stageline's account. At the door, he left her saying, "I will have to ride to the mines and persuade the miners that we can bring their gold safely to Denver."

Norah asked, "Can we?"

"Maybe. If we can't, you will go back east broke, and I will be on the run from the Vigilantes, but if that

happens, at least the miners will be no worse off than they are now."

He left her then, looking somewhat bewildered. An auction was in progress at the Elephant Corral, and Cole bought himself a horse, paying a shocking price, but getting a good animal, a long-legged, deep-chested gray, whose mouth said he was five years old.

Saddle and bridle for the horse cost him about a fourth of what the horse cost. Satisfied, Cole crossed Cherry Creek at Blake, turning toward the mountains at Ferry.

While it was not at all necessary, he rode the ferry across the Platte and paid his toll cheerfully, meanwhile making the acquaintance of the ferryman, a huge, bearded man named Rostov.

With the exception of this ferry, the road was free then, the ten miles to Golden City, and thence south to the mouth of Apex canyon. Here, the toll road began.

Cole had his dinner at the Mount Vernon House, so named because of the proprietor's inordinate admiration for George Washington. Then, paying his toll of ten cents for the distance between Mount Vernon House and Elk Park, he set out, alternately walking and trotting the gray.

The way was steep here, and Cole was thankful for the care and time he had used in selecting the horse, for the gray took Cole's crowding on this grade without undue heavy breathing or sweating.

This was a land of towering yellow pine, of belly deep grass, of sheer granite canyon. Aspen thickets made light green patches against the deeper green of the pines. The road kept rising, and at four, Cole reached Elk Park, continuing westward to Cresswell, a way station, post-office and saloon.

Leaving, he again paid a toll for the shorter distance between here and the Vasquez, and at dusk, dropped down the steep grade into the deep canyon of the Vasquez.

Along this stream winked tiny flares, those of the miners. Cole rode along the road in darkness, coming at last to a fire where half a dozen men hunkered, eating beans from tin plates. He dismounted and approached.

Suspicion brought these men around, facing him, forming a solid wall of hostility. They were all bearded, all ragged and dirty and reminded Cole more of wild animals than of men. One asked roughly. "What you want?"

Cole felt at a distinct disadvantage. He said, "Name's Cole Etes. I'm starting a stageline from here to Denver City to haul gold mostly. I'm hiring guards and booking shipments."

The hostility in these men was unchanged, but one of them asked, "You guarantee delivery?"

THIS WAS the crux of the whole matter, Cole knew. He asked a question of his own by way of reply. "When you ship gold from Denver to New York, does the line guarantee delivery?"

A man growled, "Ain't interested. Ride out, stranger."

Cole turned, bitter discouragement touching him. But a new voice said, "Wait, Joe. This could be a good thing for us all."

Cole swung back and looked at the speaker in the flickering light from the fire between them. He was a tall man, and very thin. Not a whit cleaner or less ragged than the others, he nevertheless showed an intelligence not apparent in the others, and his speech was that of a man of education.

Cole said, "No stageline goes further than to guarantee that due care will be used in protecting shipments. And no stageline's guarantee is better than the men behind it. I could promise a guarantee, but if a large shipment were lost and the line liquidated, there would still not be enough to replace the loss. I'm offering you something better than what you've got, which is nothing at all. Not a one of you can sleep soundly; not a one of you but

what is afraid to take your gold and start for Denver. And when one of you does take the chance, he is risking not only his gold, but his life as well."

The tall man said, "We'll talk about it," and his voice had an air of finality. Again Cole turned. He mounted his horse, continuing downstream. He could feel the unwinking stare of the six against his back and thought. "There is nothing in this world that is worth living in a cave like an animal and fearing all other men until it becomes an obsession."

He was almost clear of the circle of firelight when an odd feeling of uneasiness possessed him. He almost yanked his head around to look back, but then he thought, "It is only something that I have caught from them. There is so much fear in them that some of it has rubbed off on me."

He rode another ten feet with the uneasiness increasing until it was a plain tingle in his spine. Not used to ignoring these signs, these hunches,

Cole suddenly reined his horse to one side, driving the spurs deep into the animal's sides. Behind him, flame blossomed from the muzzle of a rifle, the racket of the shot reaching his ears an instant later. A smashing blow drove itself against Cole's shoulder, catapulting him from the saddle. He heard the shouting of the men that had been at the fire, and then the drumming of a galloping horse's hooves against the ground.

Not understanding, he drew his revolver, muffling the click of the hammer as he drew it back by holding it between his arm and body. His left shoulder was numb, sticky and warm with the free-flowing blood. Cole heard the voice of the tall miner, "Looks like they didn't want him freighting out gold. And it's too late for us to change our minds now."

Cole called, "Not too late. The light was bad for shooting and he only got my shoulder."

He got his knees, still feeling little pain from the shoulder wound, still



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aware of the numbness in it. He caught his horse and walked toward the approaching men, and as his arm swung at his side, the pain came in waves to the shoulder, making these men blur and swim before his eyes. The tall man caught his good arm, steadying him, and led him to the fire. Cole sat down, with no strength left in him at all, and the tall man cut away his sleeve with a knife. After that, there was the searing heat of red-hot iron against his shoulder, which, mercifully, he could stand for only an instant. But through this all, he had the feeling that hostility had gone from this group. He heard Joe's ragged voice, just as he lapsed into unconsciousness, "If they want him dead so bad, Vance, mebbe we should want him alive."

Cole awoke once during the night, blanket wrapped beside the dying fire. For a long while he lay, staring at the bright, star-studded sky, and listening to the steady roar of the Vasquez as it tumbled through the canyon toward the plain below. He dozed then, and when he awoke again, it was full daylight and nearly a score of men stood around him, looking down. Cole stumbled awkwardly to his feet.

The tall one, Vance Daugherty, said, "We've talked it over, and we'll try you out, twenty of us at five hundred dollars apiece."

Cole felt a new surge of hope. He asked, "Any of you want to hire on as guards? Pay is sixty a month and beans."

Vance Daugherty said, "I will ride the first half-dozen trips, because I am the one who has talked for you. Now fill your belly with beans and coffee and go get your coach."

CHAPTER VIII

TOO LATE

AT NIGHTFALL, Cole splashed across the Platte and ten minutes later, dismounted

at the Elephant Corral. "Feed him good," he told the hostler. "He's earned it."

He swung around the corner and headed uptown, thinking, "First step is a bath, then a feed. If I feel like it by then, I'll have Doc Fox look at my shoulder." There was an unaccustomed lightness in his head, and the shoulder and arm throbbed mercifully. Cole raised it with his right hand and slipped it into the sling Sally Ambrook had fashioned from her shawl. Even yet a hint of Sally's fragrance inhabited the shawl, and Cole smiled a little, remembering this girl.

As he passed the Quincy House, the door swung open and a voice called, "Cole—Mr. Estes!" and Cole paused, turning. Norah Forrest came onto the walk clad in a dark blue dress with a high collar of white lace. Even in the poor light cast from the windows of the Quincy House, she saw the cutaway sleeve of his buckskin shirt, the dirt and blood on his clothes, the shadow of weariness in his face. Her hand came out and touched his arm lightly.

"You've been hurt."

"Not bad. The bushwhacker's aim was bad."

Concern turned her face sober, her lips soft. Fear touched her wide eyes. "Supposing his aim had been good? Oh, Cole, it isn't worth it. It isn't worth it at all. Please, let's give it up. I have enough money. You can find something to do that will not put your life in danger."

Surprise ran through Cole, and he said, "You have changed already. It is an old saying that the frontier is tough on women and horses. But I like you better for the change it has made in you."

She laughed unsteadily. Cole said, "There are several reasons I am doing this, and it surprises me to realize that money is the least of them."

"What reason could there be except money?"

"Mike, for one thing. I owe Mike

something. Now that I am started I find I owe something to the miners on the Vasquez who have put their trust in me."

Norah's eyes dropped and disappointment put a shadow across her face. Cole thought, "It would not have hurt to tell her she was one of the reasons for doing this," and he realized suddenly that it would have been true.

Norah murmured, "You were successful in persuading them that you could transport their gold safely?"

He nodded. Suddenly full awareness came to him of how entirely alone was this girl, of how courageously she was facing this loneliness. On impulse, he put out his right arm, circled her waist and drew her to him. She did not resist, but instead was passive, waiting. Cole bent his head and touched her lips lightly with his own. Drawing back, he said, "It is a rough town now, with no place for a girl like you. But that will change and you will be less lonely."

A smile crossed Norah's face, a smile that was older than her years. Standing on tiptoe, she kissed him full on the lips, then turned and fled back into the door of the Quincy House.

Cole stood for a moment, looking after, and then, half-smiling, continued toward the Planter's House.

Later, bathed, shaved and fed, a clean dressing on his shoulder, he sought out Hobart, finding him in the lobby of the Planter's House. Hobart had been busy while Cole was gone. He had sent a rider eastward to Leavenworth, calling in all of the way-station keepers, with instructions to bring all moveable equipment and horses. He had hired carpenters and wheelwrights to put into shape what equipment was in Denver City. He had a coach ready for Cole to take in the morning, and a driver to hold the reins. Cole said with satisfaction, "You may be a farmer, but you are more than that."

Hobart flushed. Cole rose. "For some reason, tonight, the thought of a bed is more welcome than the thought of a bottle. Good night."

He made his way through the crowded lobby, and fifteen minutes later, with a chair propped against the door, was asleep.

DAWN FOUND Cole atop the tall seat of a Troy coach, a shot-gun held snugly against the seatback by the pressure of his body. Beside him rode the driver, Elston, red-haired, freckled and salty, and below in the coach rode Hobart. A drunk tottered on the walk beside the McGaa Street bridge, his maudlin song halted while he stared. A swamper tossed a bucket of dirty water into the street from the door of a saloon on 4th, narrowly missing a man slumped against the wall. The swamper raised a salutary hand as the coach rumbled past, and Cole waved back.

The sun poked above the rim of the eastern plain, laying its copper glow against the jagged line of peaks to the west. On the naked backrange, a thin layer of new snow lay, and Cole murmured to the driver, "They'd better get busy on the Vasquez if they expect to get their gold out before the winter sets in."

"Plenty of time. There will be two full months and a part of another before frost stops 'em."

Drawn by six mules, the coach ran along the dusty road, climbing steadily, and before mid-morning, reached the Mount Vernon House, where Cole paid their toll of a dollar and a half, which would carry them as far as Cresswell, west of Elk Park.

Now the mules slowed, laboring against their traces as they pulled the weight of the coach up these steep and rocky grades. The coach swayed and strained against its bullhide braces. Narrow was this road, and a dozen times they were forced to pull far to one side to let a wagon or buckboard pass. Men riding saddle horses

and mules were numerous, and all stared, for this was the first coach they had seen on this road. Occasionally, Elston would pass a heavily laden wagon, a freighter bound for the placers on the Vasquez with beans, sugar, coffee and miner's tools.

With his left arm useless, and giving him pain with every jolt the Troy took, Cole was forced to cling to the seat with his right hand, bracing his feet against the floorboards, and even then, there were times when he thought he would be flung clear.

They had their dinner at Cresswell, though it was well after noon when they reached the place, and after this, Cole rode inside the coach where he could better brace himself and spare his arm, which was now torturing him to an extent that it blurred his vision and made his head reel. In late afternoon, brakes squealing, they rolled down the long, steep grade into the canyon of the Vasquez.

Vance Daugherty waited with a score of others beside the burnt out ashes of last night's fire, and as Cole climbed out of the coach, and approached, he said, "They have changed their minds a dozen times since you were here. They were wondering why they should be the ones to get this plan started, to take all the risks, but I have finally convinced them that conditions will get no better unless someone is willing to take a chance. You and I are gambling our lives. These others have finally agreed to take a chance with their gold."

Cole thought he noted a change in this man since he had last seen the man, a certain lack of straightforwardness he had not previously noticed. He said, "A Vigilante movement has started in Denver City because of the murder of a man named Osten, who tried to carry his gold to Denver alone. In time his murderers will be known and punished. In the meantime, it will be a good thing to let them know that Osten was not the only one who was not afraid of

them. Someday, a man will recognize them and live to tell of it and that will be the chance for the Vigilantes to start their cleanup."

Now each man stepped forward to place his gold in the coach's strong-box. This was not gold dust and nuggets carried in pokes, but solid chunks of gold that had been fused in the campfire. They were like gleaming pieces of slag from a blast furnace. Each was tagged with its owners name, and when the box was full, Cole closed the lid and snapped the padlock on it.

Hobart and Elston heaved it inside the coach. Cole climbed inside, and checked the loads in his Colt's. Elston climbed to the seat and sorted his reins, and Hobart climbed up beside him. Vance Daugherty had disappeared, but he came running alongside as the coach got under way and pulled himself into the door. As he did this, his swinging coat banged against the side of the coach with a thud, as though he carried a pocketful of rocks.

ONCE INSIDE, he hauled a bottle from his pocket, grinning. "It will be a long ride into Denver City, and this will help pass the time."

Cole felt a stir of anger. He growled, "This is no party, but a serious thing. We are sure to be jumped somewhere along the way, and a man with his wits addled by liquor is no good in a fight. Put the damned thing away."

His appreciation for the support this man had given him was rapidly turning to dislike. There was something furtive and insincere about Daugherty that grated against Cole's sense of what a man should be. And instead of showing anger, as most men would, he only shrugged and smiled, and settled back against the seat.

Tension began to build in Cole as the coach began its long climb out of the canyon. The road wound intermi-

nably back and forth in switchbacks to reduce the grade, and on first one side and then the other, the canyon yawned below them, the roar of the Vasquez slowly diminishing as they gained altitude.

At sundown, they came to the top of the hill and started down the eastern side. Now Cole could relax somewhat, for here began a long, wide valley through which a tiny stream wandered, and there were no places where they could be ambushed. Out of a corner of his eye, he studied Daugherty, wondering about this man. He said, "It is unusual to find an educated man working a placer. Gold seekers are usually those who have found only failure in their daily lives, and are always looking for something to remedy that failure quickly."

Vance Daugherty gave him a twisted grin. He replied, "You think that because a man is educated that he is unfamiliar with failure?"

"I had that thought."

Daugherty laughed bitterly. "It is what all men think who do not have an education." His thin face, covered lightly with graying whiskers, showed Cole self-derision, even what appeared to be self-contempt. He said, "Success or failure is determined by what is in the man, not by what he had been taught. Even on the Vasquez, I was able to pan only about half as much as the others. But hell, why talk about me? There must be more pleasant subjects, surely, to pass the time."

Something about Daugherty's words puzzled Cole, but he could not decide what it was. The coach came off this grade, out of the lush meadow, and commenced to climb into heavy timber. The coolness, the dampness of the air here came through the windows of the coach and brought with it the light, pleasant smell of pine. Cole grew tense again now, for here, with the coach slowed on the grade and with abundant concealment, an ambush was possible, even likely.

COLE STUCK his head close to the window, peering into the increasing gloom ahead. Above him, the driver's whip snaked out, popping above the heads of the mules, and Cole could hear Elston's salty stream of curses. Once, he glanced about at Daugherty. The man sat stiffly on the edge of his seat, and his face had turned white. His eyes had a peculiar, fixed look, and his hands were held against his knees, and could not stay still. Cole said, "Relax man. It is no use worrying about the thing until it happens."

Turned vaguely uneasy, he drew his Colt's and laid it on the seat beside him, holding it down and still with his leg. He was going back over, in his mind, Daugherty's words of a few minutes ago and trying to put his finger on what it was in them that had so puzzled him.

Suddenly he yanked his head around to stare at the tall man. He growled, "You said you *were* able to pan only half as much as the others. Why 'were'? Aren't you going back?"

Abruptly now, Elston's voice rose atop the coach, and a gun yelped ahead in the timber. A strange voice shouted, "Pull in, driver, or I'll drop you off that box!"

Cole snatched the Colt's from under his leg and poked its muzzle through the window. He heard the movement of Daugherty behind him, ignoring it for the moment, and snapped a shot toward the flash in the heavy wall of timber. He heard Elston's whip lay itself sharply against the mules, and felt the coach leap forward.

Hobart's shotgun roared above him and its flash illuminated for an instant the timber, and the half dozen horsemen within it. Cole put a shot into the midst of them, and was rewarded by a man's harsh yell of pain. Again the shotgun roared and now gunfire blossomed in the timber. Bullets tore through the thin panels of the coach.

Cole half-turned to Daugherty to ask, "What in hell's the matter with you? Ain't you got a gun?"

He caught the man's movement rising from the seat on the opposite side of the coach, but instead of moving across to the other seat, the man came directly at him. Cole yelled, "Watch what you're doing, damn..." Then he saw Daugherty's upraised arm, saw the long-barreled pistol in the man's hand. He threw himself forward, but even as he did he knew he was too late.

The barrel of Daugherty's revolver came down against his skull, bringing an instant of whirling pain, and then utter blackness.

CHAPTER IX

"STRING 'EM UP!"

DAWN WAS a flaming spectacle of fiery cloud and pale blue sky. The Troy coach stood hidden in the timber no more than two hundred yards from the road, the lead mules tied to a tree. Fidgeting, they sought to lower their heads to graze, succeeding only in getting enough to whet their appetites for more. The coach rocked gently back and forth with their movement, and it was this that brought Cole out of the coach, staggering and blurry-eyed. The first thing he noticed was the overpowering reek of whiskey that rose from his clothes. His confused brain fought for remembrance, or understanding of the circumstances that had put him here.

At first he thought, "I must have been on one lulu of a drunk. But how the devil did I get out here?"

Pain brought an exploratory hand to his head and his fingers ran gingerly over the lump there. Slowly then, he began to recall. He remembered the chest full of gold that had been in the coach. He remembered the attack, the treachery of Vance Daugherty. He

growled, "Hobart—and Elston? Where the hell are they?"

He made a circle of the coach at a shuffling run that brought dizzying waves of pain and sickness to his head. Then he headed back along the plain tracks the coach had made in the tall grass, coming at last to the road, and to the two, still, cold bodies that lay there sprawled grotesquely in the dewy grass.

Cole sat down, his stomach contracting painfully. He retched and gagged and almost fainted.

Down the steep grade toward the Vasquez, he heard a shout and plainly then, a man's steady cursing, the creak of an axle and the metallic jangle of harness. Suddenly it came over him of how this would look. Cole Estes, reeking of whisky, vomiting, his driver and guard dead on the ground. "God," he thought, "I've got to have time to think this out."

He staggered to his feet and fighting against the pain in his injured arm, dragged first Hobart and then Elston into the timber where they would be hidden from the road. Just in time did he hide himself, watching from concealment the passage of an empty freight wagon as it passed on its slow and rumbling way toward Denver City.

He held his breath as the wagon passed, watching the driver anxiously lest he note the trails of disturbance in the grass, but the man was too occupied with cursing his mules to give more than a passing glance to the wayside.

As the sound of his cursing faded on the clear morning air, Cole went again to the coach. The chest in which the gold had been locked lay splintered and gaping on the ground a dozen yards away. Inside the coach lay Cole's revolver, untouched, and an empty whisky bottle, one Cole now recognized as the bottle Daugherty had waved at him as he entered the coach on the Vasquez.

"Why didn't they kill me too?" he

asked himself, and for a moment considered the possibility that they thought they had. But he shook his head. "They wouldn't be that foolish," he whispered. "It's got to be something else. If they thought I was dead, why pour whisky over me?"

It came to him then, and he knew that this was Jess Dyer's way of revenging himself against Cole for the five thousand he had paid out unnecessarily. Dyer had felt that the killing of Cole would afford him only nominal revenge. But this...

Cole considered what would now happen. He would drive the coach on into Denver City, carrying the bodies of Elston and Hobart, but no gold. He himself would reek of whisky, would show every evidence of having been on a monstrous drunk. Who then, would believe his story? Would the miners believe him, those who had lost their gold? Would Norah Forrest believe him, she whose doubt of him had been all too apparent after his interview with Dyer? Her tenuous faith in him would shatter all too easily.

Nor would the newly organized Vigilantes believe that Cole had been sober, that he had been slugged by Daugherty, whom somehow Dyer must have reached and bought in the time it took Cole to return to Denver for the coach. At the very best, Cole could expect to be driven from the country, accused of having betrayed everyone who trusted him. At worst, he could expect to decorate the handy limb of a cottonwood tree.

The desolation of utter despair washed over Cole. The only apparent out occurred to him now, that of mounting one of the mules and fleeing the country. For a short instant he considered this, but then his jaw hardened and his eyes turned cold. "That is what Dyer wants me to do," he growled. "Then he'll have a free hand to come in here with his own line." He began to understand what Daugherty's stake had been. The ten thousand in gold the coach had been

carrying, less, perhaps, the five thousand Dyer had given Norah Forrest—safe conduct to Denver, maybe even to Leavenworth, with his own gold.

Cole thought desperately, "There has got to be someone in Denver who will believe me." He retrieved his gun from the floor of the coach and began to load it awkwardly from the powder flask at his belt. The shawl sling, used lately only to rest his arm when it was not in use, caught his eye and he murmured, "Sally. I wonder..." He called to mind the steady clarity of her blue eyes, the softness, the womanliness that was in her.

Fully aware that his story was thin, that it would be difficult for anyone to believe, he nevertheless also knew that this was a chance he had to take. He had to have sanctuary somewhere from which to start his search for Daugherty, who was the key to this thing.

Desperation turned his hands awkward and clumsy as he unharnessed the mules and turned them loose to graze. He thought, "If she will not believe me, at least she will not betray me to the Vigilantes." He mounted bareback, one of the mules, and set out along the road to Denver City at a steady trot, alert for other travelers and ready to leave the road at the first indication of their approach.

AT FULL dark, Cole came out of the Cherry Creek bottoms and made his cautious way to within a hundred yards of the brightly lighted front of the Gold Coin. Here he found a darkened space between two false-fronted frame buildings and took up his wait for Sally. She would pass within a yard of him on her way to work, unless, by some remote chance, she came to work by a different route, or unless she was driven tonight in the carriage of some admirer.

His inactivity, and his helplessness made Cole rage inwardly. Every hour that passed meant that Vance Daugherty was putting more miles between

himself and Cole. A dozen times during the next hour, Cole shrank back into the darkness to avoid discovery by a passer by. This furtiveness further enraged him and he was in a vicious frame of mind when he finally saw Sally turn the corner and come toward him.

She was dressed tonight in brilliant scarlet, her flaming hair done softly in a bun low on her neck. Over her dress, concealing its scantiness about shoulders and breasts, she wore a light wrap. Cole noticed tonight, as he had noticed before, the indefinable grace that was in her as she walked. As she drew abreast of his hiding place, Cole murmured, "Sally."

Startled, a hand went to her throat, and she poised for an instant like a frightened doe, ready to flee the instant she placed the source of danger. Cole said, "Sally, it's me—Cole."

Not moving, she asked, "What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

"Worse than that. Will you help me? Will you listen to me?"

There was no hesitation in her, but there was quick fear and this seemed inexplicably combined with pleasure that he had chosen her to ask for help. She said, "Go back to the alley—to the back door of the Gold Coin. Wait there. I'll come as soon as I can."

Then she was gone, moving rapidly toward the beams of light that fell across the walk from the windows of the Gold Coin. Cole walked through the velvety dark, stumbling over scrap lumber, and shortly stopped before the Gold Coin's back door. He waited only an instant. Then the door opened and Sally murmured in the darkness, "Come on. Take my hand or you'll stumble."

He closed her small, warm hand within his own and she led him up a stairway, and out onto the dimly lighted hall of the second floor. "One more flight," she whispered, and again they climbed stairs. Sally opened a door, and only then did she speak

normally as she drew him inside. "Are you in trouble? Is someone after you?"

"Not yet." Sally struck a match and held it to the lamp that stood on the table, lowering the rose-colored shade over the flame and turning it low. She turned to look at him and her face mirrored compassion and something else, something that put the look of a young girl into her eyes. "You've been hurt again."

Cole was now very conscious of his appearance, of the dirty stubble that covered his face, of the dried blood that matted his hair, most of all of the reek of whisky that still clung to his clothes. But these things seemed to matter not at all to Sally. Softly perfumed, she moved close to him. Suddenly he closed her in his arms, and she pressed herself against him, raising eager and slightly parted lips. She said wonderingly, "You are in trouble and you have come to me. Why did you not go to that other girl—Norah Forrest?"

"You'll know when you hear the story." Cole released her and stepped back. His face turned bitter. "I wouldn't believe it myself if I didn't know it was true."

HE SANK into a tapestry upholstered chair, with the weariness of the last two days beginning to make itself felt. "I started a run between here and the Vasquez. I persuaded some miners to ship their gold to Denver, but the stage was held up before we got to Cresswell and the gold stolen."

Sally interrupted, "That is easy to believe. It happens every day."

"You haven't heard it all. The driver and guard were killed. I was inside the coach because it was easier on my shoulder and arm. With me inside the coach was a miner who helped persuade the others to take a chance with their gold. Instead of fighting, he slugged me, and poured whisky over me." Cole's voice rose

involuntarily, "They killed the others, but they didn't kill me. They tried to make it look as though I was drunk, and didn't put up a fight."

Cole was angry. He was angry because of what Dyer was trying to do to him, but more than that, he was angry because of Elston and especially because of Hobart, who'd been expecting help from inside the stage and had gotten none. He watched Sally closely, watching for the shadow of doubt upon her face, but he saw only surprise.

She said softly, "I have seen you only twice, and yet I believe you. But a woman's heart and the minds of men are different things. The Vigilantes are new, and this will be the first crime committed since their organization. You must not let them find you."

Cole's mind was running ahead, and he spoke his thoughts aloud. "If I was Dyer and had put Daugherty up to this thing, I'd sure as hell not want him found. I'd kill him, or I'd hold him somewhere, but I'd not let him out of Denver City until this thing was settled."

"Then you've got to find Daugherty."

Cole answered her bitterly, "And how can I do that? If I stick my head out of this door, they'll grab me. The coach was found this afternoon. They held a meeting in the blacksmith shop at the Elephant Corral. They failed to catch the ones who killed George Osten. Do you think I'll get a fair shake if they catch me? It's too easy to say, 'He's lying! String him up!'"

With no hesitation whatever, Sally said, "You can stay here. I will bring you food."

"Marple helped organize the Vigilantes. He'll find out and turn me in."

"He will be quiet if I ask him to. He will believe you because I believe you."

Cole glanced at her sharply, be-

ginning to understand Marple, and Sally as well. He said, "I've no right to ask this of you," and stood up.

She came close to him and slipped her arms about his waist. She murmured, her eyes still and honest, "John Marple is in love with me, but that is all there is. Can you believe that a girl like me is...has never...?" Halting, she dropped her eyes. Color ran across her cheeks.

Ignoring the pain in his arm, Cole brought her roughly against him. Her arms slipped up to his neck, and she raised her lips to his. Excitement and passion were inexplicably combined with tenderness as Cole felt the eager pressure of her. His face buried itself in her fragrant, flaming hair and his lips found the soft hollow where her neck and shoulder joined. Sally gave a small, helpless cry. Then, suddenly, Cole's passion cooled as quickly as it had kindled. He pushed away from her, breathing hoarsely. "No, by God! It is the man who should be giving, not forever taking." He strode to the window and scowled into the street.

Sally's eyes upon him were still and unreadable for an instant. Then she smiled, and Cole did not see the shining pride that came in a flash to her face and left as quickly, to be replaced by a woman's unending doubt. The words, "Is it that other girl, Norah Forrest?" were never uttered. Sally stood for a moment watching him and then she said, "First of all you will need a bath and clean clothes. Then we will see what can be done about finding this Daugherty. John will help us there. I know he will help us."

She was rewarded by Cole's look of puzzled gratitude. He said, "Another woman would have been angry."

She turned away so that he would not see her face. But she was thinking, "Another woman would not love you so much that nothing mattered to her but what you wanted." She closed the door behind her and went

to find John Marple, knowing in her heart that this was all wrong, that no woman had the right to ask of a man who loved her what she was now going to ask of John Marple. Yet there was no hesitation in her at all, for she was a woman not plagued by uncertainty once she had decided what had to be done.

CHAPTER X

THE LONG MOMENT

WEARING his perpetual scowl of bitterness, the scowl which he had worn since the night George Osten's body had been buried, Karl Osten slouched down Blake toward Cherry Creek.

He was a tall and towheaded boy, thin from denying the voracious and unending hunger of youth, the hunger that was never satisfied because there was never quite enough money. His first sharp grief at the loss of his father had lessened, but there were times yet, like today, when sudden awareness that he was entirely alone would turn him sullen and defiant.

Wandering alone in the creek bottoms had its way of easing his tortured thoughts, for he was yet boy enough to find the small creatures who lived there of extreme interest. There were minnows in the shallow pools, there were frogs, rabbits, squirrels, even an occasional coyote or deer, though these were to be seen only at dusk or in early morning. There was peace in the soft voice of the creek, in the quiet rustling of the cottonwood leaves overhead. Here, alone with his back to a tree, anything became possible to Karl, even the passage money across the sea for his mother, even the discovery and punishment of his father's killer.

So down the creek Karl wandered, his path zigzagging aimlessly, and at twelve he halted and sat down, hungry, but reluctant to return to the small shack which he now occupied

together with his father's friend. Nearly hidden in willow brush, he was startled as a man walked past carrying a sack over his shoulder.

The man was bearded and dirty, but it was his furtiveness that made Karl shrink out of sight until he had passed. It was the same furtiveness that aroused the boy's curiosity and drew him along behind the stranger at a safe distance.

A quarter-mile to westward, very near the place where Cherry Creek flowed into the Platte, the man entered a small log cabin and closed the door behind. His curiosity waning, Karl nevertheless sat down and concealed himself in the brush to watch.

This cabin was small, hastily and carelessly built. Where its oiled-paper windows had once been were now rough boards, and weeds grown high about the door indicated that it had, until very recently, been abandoned, perhaps by a miner gone for the summer to the mines.

Karl gave it his fleeting attention and then lay back to day-dream of the things he would do when he found his father's killer. He was a helpless and lonely boy no longer, but a man, grown tall and strong. Muscles bulged inside his tight shirt and a gun swung at his hip. Respect showed in the faced of the people he passed on the street, and he heard a man murmur, "That's Karl Osten. He's found out who murdered his father and he's going into that saloon to kill him."

The saloon doors banged open as he thrust his way inside. At the bar, a lone man whirled, his face losing color and turning gray. Karl snarled, "Murderer!" waiting, knowing the pattern of these things, knowing that the man had to fight.

Like a cornered animal then, yellowed teeth showing, the man at the bar flung a lightning hand toward his gun. It came out, spitting flame. Bullets whined close to Karl's head. Smiling grimly, Karl drew his own

gun and fired. The man let out a scream and dropped....

Down at the cabin, a door slammed. Karl started and sat up, realizing suddenly that his forehead was bathed with sweat.

The bearded, furtive man was leaving the sack empty and dangling from his hand. This puzzled Karl. He had no way of knowing what had been in the sack, but whatever it was, it was now inside the cabin.

The man passed him, fifty feet away, and as soon as the sound of his movement through the brush had stopped, Karl rose and walked cautiously toward the small and deserted cabin.

For no apparent or tangible reason, fear touched him as he drew close, made him hesitate, nearly made him turn away. But the daydream of courage and strength was yet with him and he forced himself on.

AT ONE SIDE of the cabin a board had been torn away from a window, and it was to this opening that Karl went. Crouching beneath it, he heard a sound within the cabin that sent a chill down his spine. His breathing turned loud and hurried. Carefully he raised himself until he could peep inside.

A man sat in the center of the room at a rude table, eating, his back to Karl. He was a tall man, thin and somewhat stooped. His clothes were ragged, yet there was, in the way he ate, a certain elegance that reminded Karl of people he had seen eating in the Planter's House.

Food, then, had been in the sack. Still, it was puzzling to Karl that this man would be here, apparently well and unhurt, having his food carried to him so far and in such a furtive manner. He backed from the window, worrying at his puzzlement with only a part of his mind, thinking with the rest of his own dinner, now an hour delayed, and feeling the increasing pangs of hunger.

Shrugging lightly at the peculiar actions of men, he left his place at the window and started his long walk back toward town. He hurried because he was hungry. He had not gone two hundred yards before the bearded one stepped from behind a tree, querying roughly, "Where you goin' so fast, snoopy?" and reached a long arm out to grab him.

Instinctively, Karl began to run, dodging the reaching hand nimbly. The man lumbered along behind him, fast enough in his clumsy way, slowly closing the lead Karl had gained by his surprised first spurt of speed.

Karl resorted to dodging, to diving into thick clumps of brush and trying to outthink his pursuer. But the bearded man seemed always just a thought ahead of him, and the lead he had narrowed even more.

Panic touched Karl. His chest heaved and fought for air. His breathing grew fast and hoarse. His legs became weights and his throat was on fire.

He scrambled out of the creek bottom at Blake, the man now only fifty feet behind. Recklessly he cut in ahead of a lumbering wagon, and behind him, the man had to swerve. By this maneuver Karl gained ten feet. He crashed through a cluster of men on the walk, bowling one to the ground, and his pursurer lost another several feet in avoiding their outstretched and irate hands.

Ahead, the splendor of the Gold Coin loomed, and Karl saw a woman alighting from a carriage. He dodged, but she stepped into his path and he knocked her against the carriage driver, sprawled himself full length on the walk, skinning his nose. On hands and knees, he saw his pursuer approaching, slowing because of his sureness, his face ugly with rage and streaming sweat.

Karl yelled, "I ain't done nothin'! I just looked in an old cabin window an' seen a man eatin'. But he started chasin' me."

Sally Ambrook smiled. The coachman growled, "You little hellion! I'll learn you to go runnin' around knockin' ladies down!"

Karl howled, "Please! I didn't mean to. Don't let him get me!"

He stumbled to his feet, but his yelling had taken all of the breath that remained to him. He knew he could run no more.

The bearded man seized him roughly, and cuffed his mouth with the back of a hairy hand. Sally's voice was icy. "Take your hands off that boy!"

The carriage driver moved close, interfering in this because of Sally. "You heard her, mister! Let him go." The inevitable crowd began to collect. Hating his own weakness, Karl began to blubber, fear and exhaustion both contributing to the sobs that tore at his throat.

Sally said again, "Let him go!" and now men from the crowd moved forward to enforce her demand. The bearded one snarled viciously, but he released Karl's arm and backed away.

Sally caught at Karl's sleeve and murmured, "Go inside until you are rested. Then we will see what this is all about."

SALLY AMBROOK followed the weary and panting boy into the cool dimness that was the Gold Coin at mid-day. At first her interference had been prompted only by pity for this boy's fear and exhaustion. But then a small memory had stirred within her and recognition of his pursuer had come. The bearded man had been present the night Rupp had fought with Cole Estes. He had been one of those cheering Rupp on. Perversity and antagonism had thenceforth controlled Sally, but as she listened to the boy's hurried and breathless story, she began to wonder if he had not unwittingly uncovered the thing that might, in the end, defeat Rupp and Dyer, and save Cole. For his description of the man at the cabin tallied

with Cole's description of Daugherty. Too, it seemed odd that one of Rupp's cronies would be carrying food to a hidden man unless that man were Daugherty.

Quick elation made Sally hurry the boy upstairs, made her tremulous and hopeful while she returned downstairs to get the boy some dinner.

She brought a plate of steaming venison into Cole's room, and found him excited and jubilant. "Sally, this is it! They've got Daugherty down there at that cabin now, but they won't keep him there long. I've got to get to him, now, before they have time to take him somewhere else."

Sally sat the plate down before the boy, smiled her encouragement and watched him as he began to eat, timidly and slowly at first, but with increasing ravenousness.

Cole said, "Hang it, you're not listening."

She gave him her full attention now, feeling his excitement touch her with its contagion. He was buckling on the Navy Colt's and belt. Depression and defeat were gone from him and in their place was this new enthusiasm and strong, male-animal recklessness.

She murmured, "It is full daylight. How will you get there without being seen?"

"I don't give a hang if I am seen now. All I want is to get my two hands on that..." He paused. "Once I get to Daugherty, then the Vigilantes can have us both."

He moved toward the door. Quick fear chilled Sally, and now she pleaded, "Let John go with you. Wait until I can find him. Please. Do at least that for me."

He shrugged, disappointment plain, but also showing his full realization of how much he owed to this woman. "All right. But hurry. Rupp won't waste any time getting to Daugherty once he realizes that we know where he is."

Sally ran from the room. Five min-

utes later, she watched as Cole and John Marple mounted horses in the alley behind the Gold Coin and spurred recklessly toward Cherry Creek. Sally Ambrook had learned to care for herself in a land full of violence. She had been often afraid, but never quite so afraid as she now was. Trembling, she closed the door, and for a long moment stood with her back against it before she climbed the stairs toward Cole's room.

CHAPTER XI

THEY'LL BE BACK

MARPLE led the way, never leaving this alley until he came to the creek. A steep path led downward here into the creek bottoms, and still running, the two turned their horses and spurred them westward along the wide and sandy bottom that had been formed ages past by the rampaging waters in spring-time.

In his careful and cautious way, Marple avoided the tent settlements that lay scattered in the cottonwoods, and Cole was suddenly thankful for the man's company, knowing that he, himself, would have forgotten caution entirely in the urgency of the moment.

There was no mistaking the cabin to which Karl had referred, for it was the only permanent building within half a mile of the place where Cherry Creek entered the Platte. In a fringe of cottonwoods a hundred yards away, John Marple halted, holding his fidgeting horse with difficulty. "He may have a gun, so we had better leave the horses here and go in afoot."

Cole grinned. "I've got a better idea. We may need these horses. You stay here while I go in. When I am inside the cabin, you can bring the horses. I know Dyer's careful way. Knowing that Daugherty's presence here is known, he will lose no time in moving him and hiding him somewhere else."

There was a certain unspoken antagonism between these two. Cole recognized it for what it was, animal rivalry over Sally Ambrook, masked but lightly by the control of civilization. But Marple nodded his grudging assent.

Sun beat downward, hot in this airless and brushy bottom. Sweat dampened Cole's shirt, and excitement stirred him as he made his swift but careful way from tree to tree, from brushy pocket to brushy pocket. At last he stood but a short stone's throw from the cabin door. But for the need to extract a confession from Daugherty, Cole would have called to him now, would have fought it out across this narrow stretch of grass that lay before the cabin door. Realizing, however, that vindication for himself lay in Daugherty's spoken words, he now catfooted across the clearing, and coming to the door, flung it wide and entered with a rush, gun in hand.

Daugherty, reading an old newspaper which he had spread out on the table, sprang to his feet, whirling, entirely surprised and unprepared. Seeing Cole, his hand snaked foolishly toward the gun at his side, but Cole sprang forward, and brought his own gun barrel smashing down across Daugherty's wrist.

Daugherty howled with pain, and a grin of pleasure crossed Cole's twisted and enraged face. His hand went out toward Daugherty's undrawn gun, and when the man dodged, he brought his own Colt's smashing against the side of Daugherty's face. Daugherty staggered. His hand went to his face, came away sticky and red with blood.

Cole said harshly, "The gun. Hand it over, and be careful or I'll give you this one again in the same place. Marple will be here in a minute, and then you're going to talk. You're going to tell everything you know, and you're going to tell us exactly what happened the other night."

"They kidnapped me! They slugged

me and I couldn't help you! I swear that's the truth. I swear it!"

Again Cole swung his gun. The grip and the cylinder smashed again into the bloody side of Daugherty's face. As Daugherty staggered, Cole yanked the man's gun from its holster and flung it sliding across the floor.

COLE'S VOICE was cold. "The trouble with thieves is that they think honest men are soft. I'll show you how soft I am. Are you going to talk, or do you want this again in the same place?" He heard the door close behind him and swung his head to look at Marple. "He'll talk, but don't interfere."

Now he asked of Daugherty, "How much did they pay you to slug me on the stage?" Vance Daugherty hesitated, but as Cole advanced with the gun in his fist, he babbled, "Two thousand, but it should have been more. There was thirty thousand in the box."

"Who paid you, Rupp or Dyer?"

"They haven't paid me yet. And they got my gold along with the rest."

"Who held up the stage?"

"It was Rupp. He's the one that's been robbing the miners on the Vasquez. He's the one that killed Osten."

Cole laughed harshly. "You're a fool! Do you think they would let you live, knowing that about them? Do you really think they'd give you back your gold or pay you for slugging me? There is only one reason that you are alive now, and that is because you might be useful as a witness against me."

Marple interjected a question, "Where does Dyer fit in?"

Daugherty said, "He's behind Rupp. When he has driven Estes out of business, he will haul the miner's gold, but there will be enough of it stolen to make the hauling profitable. And he will raise the rates for hauling it to twenty percent."

Cole grinned, asking of Marple, "Heard enough?"

Marple nodded, and Cole turned ac-

ward the door, yanking Vance Daugherty with him. The horses had wandered as far as the first fringe of brush. Marple moved toward them, and as he did, a bullet thumped into the soft log wall of the cabin. The report made a flat and vicious sound in the still, hot air.

Cole growled, "Run, damn you, but don't try to get away. If they don't get you, I will."

Vance drove across the open clearing, his legs pumping furiously, tripped as he neared the brush and slid on his face. When he came to hands and knees, the bloody side of his face was encrusted with sand, and his face was twisted with pain. But there was no pity in Cole. Pity was killed by his thinking of Elston and Hobart, dead because of this man's treachery and lust for gold.

Cole entered the thicket with a rush, as bullets ripped into the ground behind him, kicking up their spurts of fine sand.

Marple held the horses, prancing and frantic, and Cole said sharply to Daugherty, "Hoist yourself up, and fast!" Vance scrambled into the saddle and Cole snatched the reins from Marple, then leaping up behind Daugherty. Marple mounted easily and swiftly and this way, they pounded into the open and up the bank to southward, angling across the grass toward the road.

Behind, half a dozen riders boiled out of the bottom, firing over their galloping horses' heads. Daugherty yelled, his voice rising on a note of terror, "They'll kill us!" but Cole shouted into his ear, "Hell, nobody can shoot straight from a running horse. You just better hope that none of them gets the idea of stopping and using a rifle."

THE DISTANCE into town, so long to a boy afoot, was a matter of minutes to men atop galloping horses. At the Gold Coin, they yanked to a sliding halt, piling off and releasing

the horses to move off upstreet uncertainly, reins dragging. Cole shoved Daugherty into the door, crowded Marple after him, saying, "Watch him. He'll get away if he can," and turned then, his lips splitting into a savage grin. As the pursuers rounded the corner, he brought up the smooth-worn Navy Colt's and let a shot rip downstreet toward the creek. A man yelled and came tumbling from his saddle.

This brought the lot of them to a sliding halt, but their shooting from the backs of these plunging horses was no match for Cole's steady aim. Cole fired again, dropping a second man. His third shot went through the neck of one of the horses, and the animal went down to pin his rider beneath his twitching body.

As quickly as they had come into it, they whirled and went out of this street, but behind they left two still shapes and a yelling, struggling man pinned beneath a dead horse.

Cole backed into the Gold Coin and heard Marple's worried voice, "They'll be back. We've got the thing that will bust their gang wide open. I'm going out to round up the Vigilantes. We'll never have a better chance to clean out Rupp's crew."

He ran through the door, but a shot ripped into the frame wall beside him and he ducked swiftly back. Cole said, "They didn't run. They're covering the door from the corner with rifles. Try the back."

Together they ran through the big room, and now Daugherty followed, craven and thoroughly frightened, but Sally met them there at the alley door. "The alley is full of men. I barred the door."

Cole shrugged, and Marple said, "The Vigilantes will hear the shooting."

But Sally was more realistic. "Half of the men in the alley belong to the Vigilantes." Her face was still and frightened, and it held her knowledge of how this would end. Confusion was

allied with Rupp's forces. The Vigilantes would be disorganized, easily persuaded that this attack was for the sole purpose of killing or capturing Cole Estes, whom Marple was hiding in the Gold Coin.

Marple asked, "What will they do now?"

Cole looked at Sally, so soft and wide-eyed, so filled with fear. He would not say what was in his thoughts, but he knew how ruthless Jess Dyer could be. There was one way of eliminating all of the opposition in one terrible operation. Jess Dyer would not overlook it. Of that Cole was certain. Coal-oil and fire would do for Jess Dyer what the guns of his toughs could not.

Yet not for long was Sally to be sparred the torment of terror. Within half an hour flames were licking at the walls of the towering and imposing Gold Coin. The walls were dry and fire-hungry. Heat forced the four up the stairs, but it was not until they reached the third floor that Cole remembered Karl Osten.

"Where's the boy?"

Concern sent Sally running from room to room, and when she came back, there was puzzlement in her, but also there was elation, and gladness that in some way the boy had been spared this death by fire. "Poor kid. He must have been afraid even of staying here. He must have run out the front door while you were leaving by the back."

The fire in the lower portion of the building now made a steady roar, and the rising heat became unbearable. Minutes only remained to them, Cole knew. He went to the window and began firing methodically into the street. Useless, perhaps, but it was very necessary to him that this should cost Dyer something. He saw the look that passed between Sally and Marple, and suddenly self-blame flooded over him, because it was he who had brought them to this. Swiftly he began to rip bedsheets into strips, knotting these

strips together into a long rope. He would die by a bullet, perhaps, before he could reach the ground. But at least he would not die helplessly.

CHAPTER XII

THE RIGHTEOUS ANGER

CARL OSTEN had known by the very urgency and concern that was in Cole Estes that his discovery of the man in the cabin had an importance greater than that which was at first apparent. He was grateful to Sally for rescuing him from the bearded man, yet she was a stranger, and as such, could not entirely quiet the fear that was beginning to consume him. He sensed that there was real danger in the thing he had discovered. To the strongest of mortals danger is most easily faced from familiar surroundings.

So as soon as Sally, Cole and John Marple went down the stairs, Karl followed quietly, and as Cole and Marple rode away from the back door, Karl slipped out the front.

He had gone only a quarter block when he noticed a man following him, closing the distance between them rapidly. Karl ducked into a narrow passageway between two buildings, ran, and when he came to the alley, turned and lost himself in a pile of empty crates and rubbish.

Crouching there, he saw the man come into the alley, and shortly saw him meet with two others who had entered from either end of the alley. The three stood, talking quietly, and Karl caught the words, "He's hiding here somewhere. You two cover the ends of the alley, and I'll look around. Rupp will nail our hides to the barn door if that kid gets to the Vigilantes."

Trembling, Karl waited. He could hear the man poking around in the rubbish pile, drawing nearer. A rat scurried past him, pausing momentarily to stare at him with beady, un-

winking eyes. The man kicked a can, and it rolled to within inches of Karl's feet. Jumping up, he leaped atop the piled crates, fell, felt the man's clutching hand. Then he was away, and he darted up two flights of open stairway and ran into a dim hall. A door was open into a room to his right, and he went through this, coming to a window that faced onto the roof of an adjoining building. A drop of ten feet yawned below the window, but Karl lowered himself until he was hanging by his hands, and then dropped. Gravel crunched under his feet. Above, he could hear the sound as his pursuer pounded into the hall.

Karl ran, and crouched behind a chimney halfway across the flat roof. He trembled as he heard the man's cursing voice from the window, and he waited in terror for the sound that would tell him the man had dropped from it.

The sound did not come and he heard the man's retreating steps, heard a door slam, heard the baffled and obscene cursing, muffled by distance. Below in the alley, one of the others called, "Get him, Sam?"

And Sam yelled down, "Hell, he's here somewhere. It's a ten foot drop out of this window. Come on up here an' give me a hand."

For an eternity, Karl crouched there, unmoving. His legs turned stiff and began to tingle from poor circulation, yet he would not move. He could see the towering Gold Coin across the street, and after what he judged to be half an hour, heard the men again in the alley. "That kid just disappeared! Let's get the hell out of here. As long as Rupp don't know he got away, we'll be all right, so don't say anything."

It was then that the shots sounded in the street, mingled with the frantic pound of galloping hooves. Taking this chance, Karl crept to the edge of the roof, peeping over the low parapet to look into the street. He saw Cole Estes drop two men and a horse with

three deliberate shots. Still Karl waited. He saw Rupp's men run into the street from both ends and he saw the start of the blaze and once, Sally's white and frightened face at an upstairs window.

To Karl, this suddenly abrupt daylight violence was shockingly unreal, and fear for his own life brought a quick trembling over him that made his teeth chatter. Fear had touched him before while he was being chased. But it had not been this icy and raw fear for his life. In panic, he ran to the back edge of the roof.

He scanned the alley from one end to the other, but saw no one, for the excitement in the street had drawn everyone there. A leanto shack provided a quick and easy way to the ground, and five minutes later, Karl pounded into the tiny one room shack on the eastern outskirts of town.

The fat man forced quiet and coherence into the terrified boy by sternness and patience, and when he had the story, said, taking down the long flintlock rifle from the wall, "Come with me, Karl. We will see what the Vigilantes will do now. If they will do nothing, then at least you and I can do our bit against these murderers." He handed Karl the pistol which had been his father's, and led the way at a swift and panting walk toward town.

THERE IS something grimly terrible about the righteous anger of honest men. Cole saw them coming, in tightly compact groups from either end of the street, as he swung himself from the window and began his sliding descent to the ground. With his head level with the window, he told Sally, "If it will hold my weight, it will hold yours. Wait until the shooting stops and then come on down."

The knots slowed him and bullets cut viciously into the frame walls beside him. Concentrating only on speeding his descent, he heard the vicious chatter of gunfire as the Vigilantes

opened up on the concealed and sniping toughs. He felt a slamming blow against his left arm, the burn of pain, and the wetness of blood. The arm lost all of its strength in a single, numbing instant, and Cole slid unchecked for a full five feet until his right hand caught on one of the knots. But in this short instant, a scream rose from the street below. Holding on, sweating, Cole glanced around, saw the upturned and terrified face of Norah Forrest.

Her scream was not heard by himself alone. He saw the monstrous and long-armed figure of Rupp, running, saw him seize the girl, saw the brief struggle and the brutal blow of Rupp's fist that turned her limp and silent.

Rage flamed in his brain and he released the rude rope, dropping the last ten feet and feeling the shock of falling, the momentary dizziness as he hit the ground. Rupp was running, the form of Norah tossed across his shoulder.

From the window above, Cole heard Sally's scream, "Cole!" and yanked his glance around, tilting his face upward. Sally was sliding down the rope, and above her John Marple's face was a mask of horrified concern. Cole glanced around once more, the awfulness of indecision tearing at him. Rupp had disappeared and his disappearance with Norah Forrest gave Cole the answer he had been seeking, but loving Norah or not, he could not leave until Sally was safe on the ground.

He waited then, catching her in his arms before her feet could touch the ground. In an instant, John Marple was down, and Daugherty came immediately behind him. Cole released Sally, who gave his face an instant's searching, then turned wordlessly to Marple. Marple tossed Cole a triumphant look, closing Sally in his arms, and Cole grinned. Then he whirled, running, heading for the Planter's House, and the offices of the

(please turn to page 112)

THERE WERE two shots. They came close together, sharp and brittle like the cracking of a dry branch somewhere off in the night. Then a man screamed.

Caleb James, hunkered down at the door of the ranch house, jumped to his feet, letting the cigarette fall from his fingers. His ear strained to catch any other sound, but during that brief moment of waiting he heard nothing. The anguished cry died, leaving only

the soft swish of the breeze through the cottonwoods.

As he began running, Caleb became aware of the commotion that had broken out in the bunkhouse. He was joined by Texas Pete and Rock Donovan, who were also heading in the direction from which the sound of shooting had come. Behind him other feet pounded against the ground as the other hands broke out into the night.

It was Texas Pete who found the body in the gully behind the shed where the winter feed was stored. He



They lived wild and dangerously,
cleaning up the town they settled in.

COLD TRAIL

by WILL COTTON

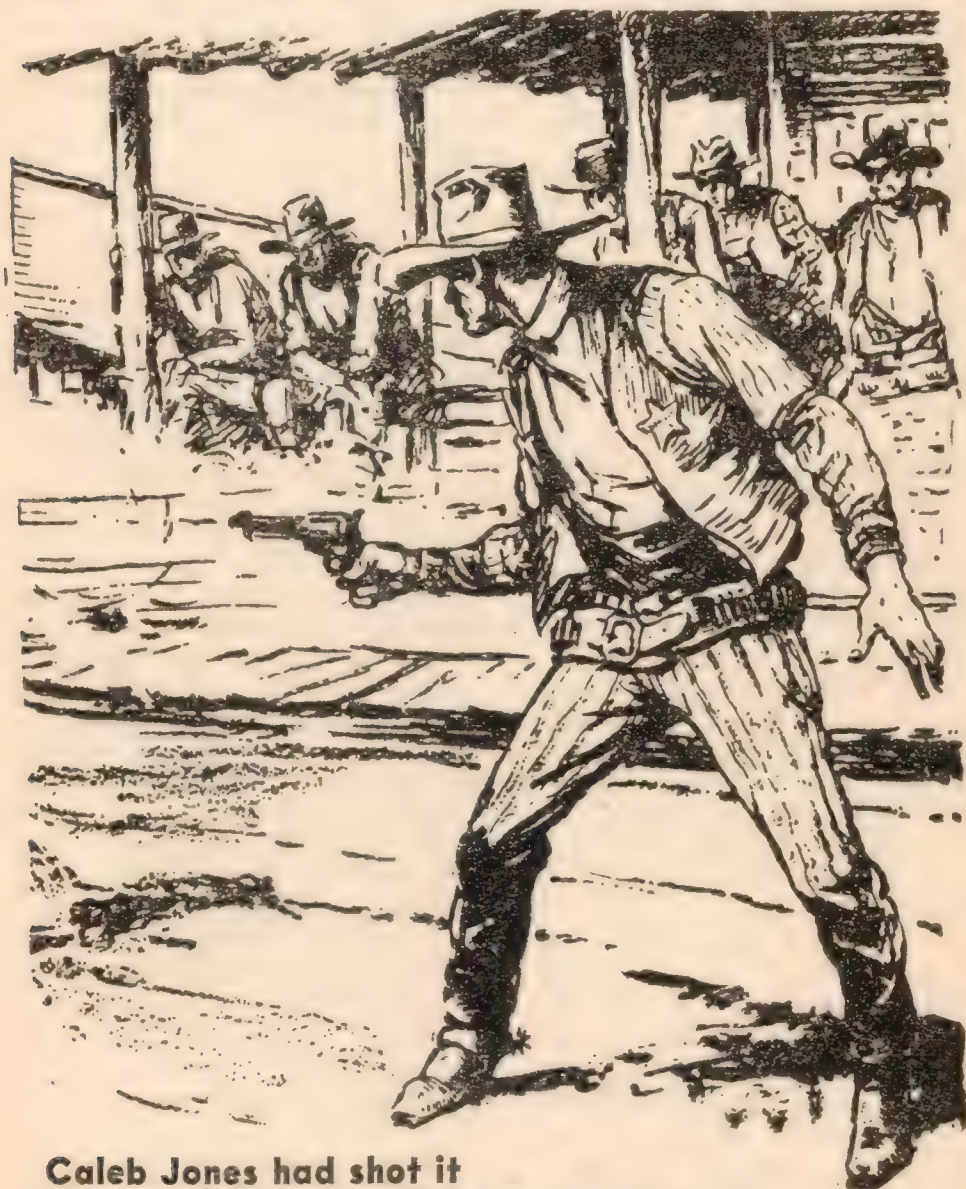
called out to Caleb, his voice almost drowned in the confusion of moving men. As Caleb came over, the puncher struck a match and held it in his cupped hands. He held the flickering light so that it danced over the face of the figure stretched out along the rocky floor of the gully. Caleb thought he saw the lips move, but he knew that was only a trick played by the flaring match.

"Gordon," Caleb said slowly. He dropped down on his knee beside the dead man, feeling a sudden ache pushing upwards inside him.

The match Tex was holding burned out.

"Got him both times," the puncher said. His voice sounded weary. "Must have made a good target against the moon."

Caleb nodded. The hands who had



Caleb Jones had shot it out with gunslicks before; he savvied his chances. But this time so much more than his life rode on the speed of his draw

come up had gathered around in a circle. They stood silently, hardly breathing, their faces blurred in the soft moonlight. Caleb heard the big puncher suck in a lungful of air before he went on:

"Don't reckon Gordon had a chance. We better git him back to the house. I'll send one of the boys fur the sheriff."

"Thanks, Tex," Caleb said as he stood up. He had been expecting something like this, ever since he had received the warning. But now that it had happened, it was hard to believe. Gordon had got a warning, too. A scrawled note in pencil saying only that Bill Kiner hadn't forgotten. But Gordon had laughed it off, saying no ghost of the past was going to frighten him. Well, this was the answer. Caleb felt the muscles in the pit of his stomach knotting.

It had been six years ago that, as sheriff of Tanner, he had captured Bill Kiner after a gun battle and sent him to jail. Gordon had been Caleb's deputy then and when Caleb turned in his badge to take up ranching, Gordon had come with him.

Running a hand over his square jaw, Caleb looked off into the night.

"Guess I'll be goin' in to find the law myself," he told Texas. "You and the boys check the spread as well as you can, but I don't figure you'll find much in the dark to help us. Then git some sleep."

He waited a moment, while the men picked up the limp form. It was only now, as the shock began to wear off, that Caleb really felt his loss. He and Gordon had put in a good part of their life together, from the time they were scraggly kids who decided they wanted to be cowboys, and ran away from their homes in Missouri. They'd wrangled ponies in Texas, choked in the dust along the Chisholm Trail, drifted from Mexico to Wyoming peeling broncs for their coffee and cigarettes.

Later they'd settled down in the

sprawling cowtown of Tanner, where eventually Caleb was elected sheriff. Gordon was his right hand in those days. They lived wild and dangerously, cleaning up the area because it began to seem important to have the town you settled in peaceful. Especially important, after Caleb met Molly.

WALKING slowly back to the ranch house, Caleb tried to remember what Bill Kiner was like. Six years was a long time to remember a man you had known only briefly, and then only over flaming guns as you were closing in to get him. Kiner was wanted for a vicious killing down below Tanner, but there wasn't enough proof and he had finally been sent up for a stage robbery.

As Caleb recalled, in spite of Kiner's capture, the loot had never been recovered. And he remembered how the manhunt had ended. Kiner went down with a slug through his thigh. The fellow who was with him had got away. But now, as Caleb tried to remember Kiner's features, he could summon up nothing clearly. Kiner was just one of a string of badmen who had come close enough to Tanner to be singed with Caleb's gun. They all merged together, these men with their cold glassy-blue eyes and nervous fingers. He had tried to put them out of his mind because knowing them was part of a distasteful duty he had long since turned over to other men....

Molly was waiting for him at the door of the ranch house. He supposed he'd have to tell her, but he dreaded it because she had loved Gordon, too, in a way. As he approached, she came toward him, her figure dark against the lamplight that streamed out into the night.

"I heard shooting, Caleb," she said as they met. "Has anything gone wrong?"

His arm went about her, drawing her to him. He felt grave and empty and awkward, but having his wife close to him like that made things easier.

"It's Gordon," he said tonelessly.

He felt the tremor that passed over her and he wished silently that he could protect her from the sudden grief she was experiencing.

"Gordon." The name seemed to catch in her throat. "Oh, Caleb, it must have been an accident."

"It wasn't an accident, Molly. I think it was maybe a shadow out of the past. Wanting vengeance. I think I know who killed him."

He didn't tell her what else he was thinking: that if it had been Kiner, he wouldn't stop with Gordon. He hadn't forgotten Caleb, either. They had both received the pencilled notes.

Even in his arms she shivered.

"If you know..." she whispered.

"There isn't anything I can do, right now," he assured her gently. "I'll send one of the boys up to stay with you while I ride into town."

"I wish you didn't have to go."

He wished so, too. His arms fell to his sides and he stepped back a pace while the emptiness spread inside him. She needed him. He needed her tonight, too, because she could ease his loss.

"No, Molly," he answered her. "I reckon this is something I got to handle myself."

He watched her go into the ranch house before he turned to find Tex. Tex had been around a long time, worked for Molly's father, and Caleb had seen the way the big puncher's features softened when he looked at Molly. Now that Gordon was gone, if he couldn't be around himself, Caleb wanted Tex to be near Molly, because he figured Tex, in his rough way, thought a powerful lot of her. Enough to die, if necessary, protecting her.

BATES BALLARD, the sheriff, was young and lean with a square jaw and tight lips. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and drew on his boots.

"Yeah," he said in a drawl when Caleb had finished. "We got word about a jailbreak a couple of weeks

ago. Best I kin remember, one of the fellers in it was this hombre you speak about. Kiner."

Caleb built himself a smoke. It wasn't that he himself was in any danger that mattered. He'd fought it out with gunslicks before and as always, he'd either win or lose. That is all any man could expect: a fifty-fifty chance. But he had obligations now, making things different from the days when he had worn the badge. He was married to Molly, had taken over running her spread when her old man died. And there was another thing: the child that was coming along about the middle of September.

"You see anyone that might be Kiner around these parts?" Caleb asked.

Bates was taking his gun belt off the peg over his bunk.

"I try to keep track of strangers," he told Caleb, "but it ain't like the days you was holdin' down the peace. There's the railroad workers comin' and goin' and the miners from up north. A lot of strange faces; too many for a couple of men to remember. What did this feller look like, Caleb?"

Drawing in a lungful of smoke, Caleb tried again to remember. But even if he could, Kiner would have changed. Six years behind bars alters a man's appearance as well as what is inside of him.

"Don't reckon I kin recall," Caleb said, feeling embarrassed. "We're plumb in the dark."

"A feller could hide out jest as well in town as in the hills," Bates said. "But he's an old timer, might not realize that. We'll find him, given some time. Or maybe it's some other feller, not this Kiner at all."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't mean nothin' especial. Let's git ridin'."

Caleb threw down his cigarette. He said tentatively:

"I wouldn't tell Molly too much about this. There ain't no point in scarin' her over-much."

Bates cast him a long, hard glance.

"Ever think it might be better if she knew? Then she could be ready for whatever medicine turns up."

"The only medicine that is goin' to turn up is me findin' Kiner," Caleb cut in. "The only reason I call in the law is because I have to. But it's my man hunt."

"Yeah," Bates drawled. "But maybe Kiner don't figure it that way."

THE SUN was breaking over the hulking mountains, tinting the plains with a soft rosy glow, as Caleb and Bates jogged up to the ranch house. It had been a quiet ride through the early morning, neither man talking, with only the crunch of the horses' hoofs and the creak of saddle leather to disturb Caleb's thoughts. Now the fresh smell of grass filling the cool morning air seemed to drive the weariness out of him. He glanced over at Bates and was surprised how youthful the sheriff's features seemed in the first light of day. There was a relaxed easiness about him that disturbed Caleb. It was as if he didn't take this business very seriously. But that was the way these young men were, now, not giving as much of themselves to their job as when Caleb was their age.

Then, in spite of himself, Caleb found himself smiling. He was thinking as if he were an old timer already, when he couldn't be more than half a dozen years older than Bates. That was what responsibility did. Well, it was worth it to have Molly and the baby that was on the way. Worth being serious about.

They reined in before the ranch house, smelling the frying bacon and coffee. Texas Pete came out to meet them. His cheeks seemed hollow under the stubble of whiskers, as if he hadn't slept.

"There weren't no sign we could read," Tex announced. "Seems like whoever fired them shots jest vanished. It's plumb unnatural, it is."

Bates had slid off his saddle. He stood slim and erect beside his horse.

"Ain't no killer that don't leave some sign," he said easily. "Only maybe we don't find it. After chuck I'll look around. Kin you spare me some men, Caleb?"

The rancher nodded. Now that he was back, his uneasiness was increasing. It was nothing he could pin down. Perhaps that was the trouble. He could not tell what was coming, so that there was nothing to fight against. Not until they could get a line on Kiner. He turned and went inside the ranch house. Molly was there, putting more bacon in the skillet. She looked up, her wide eyes seeking his.

"Caleb," she said softly, "what did you mean when you said it was a shadow from the past that killed Gordon?"

He looked away from her, out the window at the rolling expanse of range that looked so soft and velvety in the early morning light.

"I didn't mean anything. I guess I was jest upset."

"You wouldn't have said that unless you knew something. You knew Gordon since you were both kids. Had he been in trouble?"

Caleb sat down at the table. Standing the way she was, her feet apart and her hands resting on her hips, he could see the gentle swelling of her abdomen and he felt a pride rising up inside him that he would soon have a son. Or maybe it would be a daughter. Either way it was all right. The reason why he labored to bring riches and security out of this range was because he wanted to build up something worth passing on. It wasn't his spread, because he was here only because he'd married Molly. But one day it would be his child's spread. The child that Molly now carried in her for him. He rubbed his hand over his face.

"You knew Gordon as well as me," he said gently. "Anyway, enough to know it weren't no fault of his."

Bates and Tex came in then and Molly went back to the stove. He could hear the bacon sizzling, just as it always did, but things weren't the same, never would be now that Caleb had to go on without the soft-spoken Gordon riding beside him. Even now it came hard to realize Gordon was gone, riding alone somewhere out there in the great emptiness of God's mystery. The man who had killed him would have to pay for it. Pay in blood and anguish.

LOOKING up, he saw that Tex was watching Molly as she was dishing up the food. A curious softness had crept into the big puncher's features, almost as if he had suddenly become aware of some secret beauty. Or was in love.

Caleb shoved the thought away, back into his inner mind. Then Molly came over with the plates and he picked up his fork and began to eat mechanically, finding the food tasteless in his mouth.

"I sent Rock out to check the west range," Tex was saying as he built himself a smoke. He had already eaten. "Rock's about the most dependable hand we got, though I sure would never have thought so when he come lookin' for work. You wanted a tally of the cows out there."

"That's right." Caleb supposed you had to go on, do what should be done.

"The rest of the hands are in the bunk house," Tex went on. "So as if you want them."

"Bates'll want a posse."

Caleb drained his mug of coffee. He was grateful to Tex for assuming the authority he had. Yes, it was right. The ranch work had to go on.

Caleb said in a level voice:

"Now Gordon's gone, Tex, I got to count on you. We'll straighten out the wages later. You amiable to bein' top hand?"

"If that's what you want." There was nothing in Tex's voice to show what he was feeling.

Bates had been eating silently. Now he pushed his plate aside and stood up.

"Time to git movin'," he announced. "Afore the trail gits too cold. Caleb, I'll take all the hands you kin spare."

"Sure. Rock's out on the range and Tex better stay back to see to things here."

Bates' eye roved around the room, rested for a moment on Molly, and then he said:

"Reckon Tex goes with me. You stick here for the time being, Caleb."

Anger flared in Caleb like an exploding shell.

"I got a real reason to be out huntin' Kiner...."

Bates didn't seem to notice his anger.

"Ever think," he said calmly, "that me and the posse might go off trail somewhere. If so, might be better to have you here. Just in case."

"Still, I'm ridin' with you."

He saw Bates' jaw go solid and a bleak hardness came into his eyes. He said sharply:

"When you was totin' the badge, what did you do with a feller who wouldn't follow orders?"

The words splashed over Caleb like cold mountain water. He hated young Bates for putting it that way, because there wasn't any answer. And it galled him more to realize that Bates maybe was right. He had seen the look the young sheriff had cast at Molly. It couldn't be, even a killer like Kiner wouldn't strike at him through a woman. But how could he be sure? Yes, if Kiner did have any idea of that, Caleb wanted to be around. But he felt suddenly limp and tired and yet wanting to smash his fist into the young man's face. Tonelessly he said:

"You're sheriff. But a man has a right to go after his chum's killer. You kin keep me from ridin' in your posse, but you can't tell me what I kin do."

Bates didn't answer. He turned on his heel and went out the door. Tex gave Caleb a long look, and then fol-

lowed the sheriff. Caleb sat, sipping the refilled mug of coffee Molly brought him. He could hear the men stirring around, and after a while he could tell from the sounds that they were saddling up. They took off in a bunch. He listened to the pawing hoofs growing gradually fainter, wondering if Bates had picked up the killer's track or if he was just setting out on a hunch.

"Crazy kid," he mumbled to himself.

Then he realized that Molly had come over to the table and had sat down facing him.

"You feel bad, not being out there," she said.

"It's my hunt. It concerns me more than anyone else."

"Bates seems pretty sure of himself."

"He's a young kid. He jest thinks he knows it all."

"Maybe he knows more than you think."

"You, too," Caleb said, surprised how bitter his tone sounded. "Well, I ain't jest sittin' around waitin'."

He pushed the chair back along the floor and stood up.

He shouldn't be feeling this way, he thought, but the fire was raging fiercer in him, now. It was consuming him, burning up all caution. He had to find Kiner. Stop the madness before it went any farther. For Molly's sake and for the sake of the child she was carrying. And for his own sake, because he had so much to do before the ranch would be ready to pass on.

OUTSIDE the sun had climbed half way up into the sky, a white disk against pale blue. Across the bunchgrass he could see the small moving dots that were his men, split now into two sections, both heading into the hills that hunched out of the plain. He knew where Bates was taking them. He knew from of old the canyons where the outlaws holed in. He and Gordon had gone in after them

many times with naked guns. Bates was gambling that he would find the killer there, and perhaps he would. It was a good bet, but it wasn't necessarily a sure thing.

In Tanner, Bates' deputy had been ordered to check every stranger in town. That was a big job. But a sound approach. Now that his anger was simmering down, Caleb had to admit that he himself couldn't have done much more if he had been sheriff. But the resentment still nagged him and he found himself pacing up and down before the ranch house, knowing that he must do something himself, yet not knowing what it could be....

The blood spattered in the gully behind the shed had dried to a brown crust. Caleb tried to sort out the footprints, tried to find some shred of sign that would point to the man who had killed Gordon. Methodically he covered the ground, working outwards, finding nothing that gave him any satisfaction. And then, without warning, he heard the snapping of a dry twig coming from somewhere in the clump of cottonwoods.

Dropping flat to the ground, he reached for the sixgun along his thigh and slid it out of the holster. His heart pounded against his ribs with a racing thump and he hardly breathed as he waited there, ears strained and eyes trying to pierce the curtain of underbrush. Time passed, he could not tell how long, and nothing happened. Perhaps it was just his nerves playing tricks on him, he thought. He started scrambling to his feet.

The shot came abruptly, first the ring of the explosion followed by the whistle of air close by his ear. Caleb went down again, thumbing back the hammer of his gun and firing into the bush just before he hit the ground.

Through the puff of smoke he thought he saw a movement, back in among the cottonwoods. He triggered again, knowing that there was slight chance of his bullet reaching the unseen target. There was no answering

fire. After a few moments, Caleb began slowly wriggling forward across the stony ground.

Nerves taut, the pulse in his temple beating with a rapid throb, he wondered if his attacker had figured he'd got him or whether he was holding back from fear of Caleb's gun. He was out of the gully, now, his face low in a clump of grass. The time dragged by. Finally he pushed himself up to his knees. He heard, from way off, the bawling of a cow. Nothing else.

Then suddenly, the quiet was broken by the muffled beating of horse's hoofs somewhere beyond the cottonwoods. On his feet, now, Caleb pushed his way between the trees, his boots crunching through the brush, not heeding the branches that slapped his face. But when, a little breathless, he reached the far side of the stand of cottonwoods, his eyes, searching the range, found no rider. He could see the trail of bruised grass that led to the pinyons that hid the west trail. Whoever it was must have taken off that way. Under his breath Caleb cursed. The nearest horse was in the corral. That would give the rider a good start. Holstering his gun, he took off at a sprint.

But as he came in sight of the ranch house he saw Molly standing in the doorway, her body drawn up stiffly as she scanned the range. Then she caught sight of him, and her body seemed to go slack. The sweat began to come out on his forehead as he thought, what if Kiner or whoever it was eluded him and circled back to the ranch. He couldn't go off and leave Molly alone.

He checked his pace and went up to her.

"I heard shooting, Caleb." Her tone was level, but he could see how she was feeling from the way the skin had drawn tight across her cheeks.

"It weren't nothing," he told her. "Guess I got nerved up and I thought I heard someone in the bushes back

of the shed. So I emptied a few shots into them."

"Into the bushes."

"Sure, honey. That's all."

He didn't think she believed him from the way she stared at him. Maybe it would be better to tell her how things really were. Yet he held back, not wanting to disturb her and then the moment for telling had passed. A while later Tex rode in, bringing no news except that Bates had sent him back in case anything happened at the ranch. Then, toward noon, Rock Donovan rode in for chuck. He was dusty, covered with sweat from riding range, and there was a tired look around the corners of his eyes.

"Thought I heard a gun goin' off," he remarked casually as he slumped at the table.

"I was pluggin' some cans," Caleb lied. "Keepin' my hand in."

"I got your tally," Rock said. He handed Caleb a piece of paper. Caleb glanced at it and shoved it in his shirt pocket. It wasn't a time when he could concentrate on ranch business. Molly was over by the stove. He said softly:

"Thought I seen a rider out on the range, Rock. He was headin' for the west trail."

"I didn't see no one," Rock replied. "Not even Tex ridin' in. I was too busy countin' them critters."

Tex laughed.

"For an hombre who used to live so wide and handsome, you sure have taken mighty hard to mindin' yore work."

"When I sign on a job, I do it," Rock said. His eyes took a swing around the room, at Molly, at Tex, at Caleb. Then Rock set about eating....

AT SUNDOWN the posse returned. They had had no luck combing the hills and canyons. Later Bates' deputy rode in and took the sheriff apart for a talk. After a few minutes darkness of the early evening, the Bates called Caleb outside. In the

planes of Bates' face seemed to have sharpened. Caleb hadn't told him yet about the attack that had been made on him. He didn't know whether he really trusted this kid who was wearing the star. He could sense now, from the stiff way Bates was standing that he was worried about something.

"Guess we've been hittin' the wrong trail," Bates said slowly. "Len here sent a telegram and he jest a while back got the answer. Kiner was picked up three days ago at Halleytown. He's behind bars agin. It looks like he was startin' this way all right, but he sure enough never got here."

Caleb felt the ground under him rock.

"But that ain't possible," he said. "Who else would want to kill me and Gordon?"

"Maybe you don't figure in this deal."

"I guess I figure all right."

He was sorry he said that. Bates took a step toward him, his jaw jutting.

"Maybe you better tell me the rest," he said with a hard edge to his tone. "Maybe you don't trust me, Caleb, and I reckon the feelin's mutual by this time. But I got a job to do, and there ain't no one, includin' you, who's goin' to hold out on me."

Caleb felt his arms dangling loosely at his side. This kid was riling him up again. He was trying to act tough and important. But Caleb was too tired to make an issue of it just then. He'd straighten the kid out some other time. But now he'd spilled it, and he might as well go on. He told Bates what had happened behind the shed that morning.

As Caleb talked, Tex came up out of the darkness and joined them. After Caleb had finished, Bates grunted.

"Who else had it in for you, now it ain't Kiner?" he asked.

"No one, as far as I know."

Caleb looked over at Tex. He was smoking and the red glow from the end of his cigarette made a ruddy spat

of light in the night. Tex loved Molly, Caleb thought. After her father died he might have had dreams of marrying her and taking over the spread. He'd been a fixture around the ranch for a long time. But would he kill because Caleb had come along to smash those dreams? Would he kill Gordon, who hadn't done him any harm? Maybe. It depended on how selfish his love was.

Disgust churned his guts, that he should be thinking such thoughts about Tex. Or any of his hands. Yet now he had to suspect everyone, even those he trusted. It had been easy to put the blame on a stranger. But Caleb didn't like this. He didn't know any longer what he was fighting. He thought of Molly, of the child that would be coming along, of Gordon who had been with him through tough times and good. He himself didn't matter, except as it lay in his power to avenge his friend's death and protect his loved ones. He felt very tired, his body loose as if strung with wire that had been stretched beyond its capacity and had now lost its tautness.

"You better try to think back," Bates was saying. "I reckon whoever has it in for you and Gordon heard about Kiner's escape and used that for a cover. Or else maybe Kiner hired himself a gun. I'll do what I kin, but it will mostly have to be you, Caleb. Now I'm goin' to check the west trail."

"In the dark?"

"I reckon time's important. I'll need a man, Caleb. I'm sendin' Len back to town."

He watched Bates and his deputy saddle and ride off into the darkness. He had a curious feeling that Bates was holding back something. It didn't matter. He could get along without his help.

TEX HAD gone to the bunk house to find a hand to ride with Bates. The uselessness of his inaction began gnawing at Caleb again, and when he

started for the lights of the ranch house, he found his fists clamped into tight balls.

There was something queer about the way his attacker had made the cover of the pinyons at the west trail so quickly. No horse was that quick.

Inside he found Molly sitting by the lamp, working at some sewing, her fingers moving with nimble rapidity. As she turned it over in her hands, Caleb saw it was a tiny shirt she was working at. In the yellow lamp light her black hair was glistening. Except that the strain had cut deep lines in her features and drawn her mouth into a tight line, she made a picture that would fill any man's heart, making him glad of the woman who had come into his life. But he knew the picture was false. Her nerves were rasped, too. Caleb moved over quickly to her side and then he bent down and brushed his lips against hers.

"Bates and one of the boys is riding out the west trail," he said, not knowing what else to tell her.

"Caleb. . . ."

"Yes, honey."

"Bates told me. He thought I ought to know you were in danger, too. He realized it might be hard for you because you'd want to spare me the worry."

"I don't think I can spare you any longer."

Her fingers stopped moving and she was looking up at him, into his lean drawn face.

"What do you mean, Caleb?"

He felt uneasy. Yet he knew he was unable to resist the need that had built up inside him.

"It's jest that this is my job. I've got to find Gordon's killer. I can't jest sit around doin' nothin'."

"I know. You've been feeling that way all day."

He said slowly, an ache growing up within him:

"I might not come back. There's always that chance."

"I know that, too. But you got to

do what you feel is the right thing."

FEELING grateful for her understanding, he gathered her up in his arms, then, holding her tightly against him. He could see the way her eyes glistened as he looked into them and feel the rapid rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed. This was a woman a man could be proud of. She understood how it was, why he couldn't wait around.

The moment was shattered abruptly by the crashing of glass and the heavy thud of a stone falling against the floor. Caleb swung around, seeing first the broken window and then the flat stone that had been thrown through the window. He started for the door, halted as he saw that a bit of paper had been tied around the stone. He tore the paper free and held it up so that he could read it in the lamplight.

The words on it were scratched in heavy pencil:

Gordon got it. Next you. But not like you think. I haven't forgot you. Kiner.

He looked up, seeing Molly watching him. Silently he passed the message to her. What did it mean, "not like you think"? And it was signed Kiner. But Kiner was behind bars again.

He started to the door, just as Tex and Rock and some of the other hands came running up, attracted by the sound of the breaking glass.

Caleb glanced into the faces, wondering if one among them was a killer. In his chest his heart beat painfully. It was disloyal to be wondering that about these men who had worked so faithfully for him. But the killer was around, somewhere close by. But there was no time for speculation. And he had to rely on someone.

"We had an accident," he said lightly. "You men go back to the bunkhouse. All except Rock and Tex."

He knew the men didn't believe him. He could read it in their reluctant departure. But he couldn't take a

chance. One of them might be the killer.

"I reckon Rock 'ere better stay with Molly," Caleb said when they were alone. "You come with me, Tex."

He didn't want Tex to stay with Molly. Not after he had guessed that Tex was in love with her.

Outside, Caleb moved off a way into the darkness. Tex, beside him, said:

"You know what you're goin' to do?"

"I got to think," Caleb replied. He felt helpless, as if he were trying to ride blindfold up a mountain trail. "Tex, what do you know about the hands?"

Tex sucked in his breath.

"You reckon one of the hands done it?"

"I reckon it's got to be."

Tex took a long time before he said anything.

"In these parts, one doesn't ask many questions. A man's past is his own business."

"Until he turns killer," Caleb answered.

And then an icy ball began to form in the pit of Caleb's stomach and he suddenly knew he had been too trusting because there were only two men among those at the spread who could have killed Gordon. Only two who could have taken a shot at him.

It made him sick to realize that. He was alone in this and he would have to depend on himself. It wasn't easy to face the reality that someone you trusted was false. He watched Tex's right hand as he said:

"I guess I'll play this game myself. You go back with the boys. I got a hunch I'm goin' to follow, but if anything happens I'll hear the shots. Molly'll be all right with Rock."

Tex started to protest. Caleb turned and left him there, walking toward the corral. He moved around, as if he were saddling up, but instead he turned a horse loose and sent it off at a trot with a slap at its rump. Then

he circled around, back toward the ranch house, keeping in the shadows.

IN HIS tenseness he wanted a cigarette, but that was impossible. He felt along his cartridge belt, slung loose around his hips, reassuring himself that he had plenty of refills for the gun in his holster. Then he slid the Colt out of its leather.

Above him the breeze stirred the leaves of the cottonwoods. He could hear a low murmur of voices from the bunkhouse, but otherwise the night was strangely quiet. Too quiet, Caleb thought. He settled down to wait, backed up against a small clump of bushes. It might be a long while he had to wait. He wished again that he could smoke.

After a while the lights in the bunkhouse went out, but from the ranch the soft yellow rays still filtered through the windows throwing patches of light across the grass. Once a shadow passed across the window, and he thought it was Molly. He wondered how long he would stay there if nothing happened.

Then he felt his body jerk as he caught sight of a figure come out from the bunkhouse and start moving stealthily up the worn path toward the ranch. It might mean nothing, but when Caleb tried to draw in his breath he found his throat had constricted and it seemed that bands of steel were tightening about his chest.

The figure was too far away for Caleb to recognize as yet, merely a blurred shapeless shadow against the lighter darkness around it. Caleb shifted his position so that he could train his gun on the advancing man. Then he remained there, slowly swinging the barrel of his gun so that it remained always pointed at the shadow. The bands around his chest drew tighter and his eyes ached from staring into the night.

Instead of going to the ranch door, the figure turned aside and crept around to the side. He was avoiding

the light from the windows, but the darkness was less intense and Caleb saw who it was. At the same time a ray of light glinted from the gun in the man's hand.

Caleb wanted to refuse the evidence of his eyes. He didn't want to believe it was Tex crawling up to the ranch house with drawn gun. It hurt too much, like a wound being opened up in his body.

Moving carefully, setting each boot down slowly in the grass so that his footfalls would make no sound, Caleb began to move up after Tex. It took great effort to take those steps. Tex, with his open weatherstained face and level eyes was a man Caleb had trusted. He couldn't believe that Tex had hated him and Gordon enough to kill. But if he loved Molly enough, if the jealousy had eaten away inside him, if the bitterness of seeing the ranch he had worked on so long pass into another's hands had corroded the decency in him....

It didn't seem like Tex, but you could never read the secrets locked in a man's heart.

Tex had stopped now and was squatting beneath the window of Caleb and Molly's room. Waiting for his return, Caleb thought. Waiting to kill him, when the light came on behind that darkened window.

Caleb could hardly make Tex out now against the stained wood of the building's side. He edged in closer. He found that his finger was pressing too hard against the metal of the trigger and he forced himself to relax the tension, just enough so the trigger wouldn't trip.

He was within a few yards of Tex, now, and Caleb could see the man was peering in the unlighted window. He stayed that way a moment, then, dropping to the ground, he began to work his way along the wall toward one of the lighted windows. The tenseness of the moment crawled along Caleb's skin, so that goosebumps stood out

along his arms. Wondering why he did not fire, he said softly:

"Reach, Tex. I got you covered."

The other seemed to freeze against the wall.

"That you, boss?" Tex asked beneath his breath.

"Drop yore gun."

Tex didn't seem to hear. There was something wrong, Caleb thought as he advanced toward him, balancing the Colt against the heel of his hand, his forefinger slowly squeezing at the trigger.

"Boss, you're makin' a mistake."

Tex's words sounded rough and unreal. Caleb still hadn't fired. He was thinking, whoever threw the stone through the window hadn't known that Kiner wasn't loose any more. Because he had signed Kiner's name to the message. Tex knew Kiner had been recaptured. He'd come up while Caleb and Bates were talking. So he was making a mistake.

His brain seemed numb, trying to make sense out of the stray bits that seemed to be tossing around in his head. His gun hand fell to his side. He said softly:

"Rock Donovan."

And then, before Tex could answer, sharp and agonizing in the night came the scream of a woman. *Molly*.

Hot, angry fear spurted through Caleb. He slammed his gun against the glass of the window and pulled himself up over the sill. Then, his boots ringing against the planks of the floor, he ran through the bedroom into the lighted parlor.

He saw Molly in one corner, hands covering her face, and a short way off a man whirling around to face him. The next thing Caleb knew the room seemed to break apart as the gun Rock held exploded with a stab of orange blue light.

The impact of the slug slamming into his shoulder sent Caleb back, staggering against the wall. He felt his shoulders smash against wood and

then he was bracing his legs to keep from going down. The kick from his gun ran like a shiver up his arm.

He had faced gunmen before and he had no illusions how this might end. But he knew, too, that if he could stand his ground, he could bring Rock down with him. Through the rising cloud of powder smoke he could see Rock leaning forward, his face suddenly twisted into a mask of hate.

Then all Caleb was conscious of was the flaring tongues of flame, the roaring of the guns and the shock of bullets plowing into his flesh. He aimed carefully, with great deliberation, so that he wouldn't miss. And then his boots were sliding against the floor and he was going down, but he kept on firing until his hammer clicked on an empty chamber. And then there were more explosions as his head crashed against the floor, and a blackness began swirling all around him....

THEY WERE all there, gathered around his bed, when he opened his eyes. He saw Molly first, and she smiled at him and he tried to smile back but he couldn't make it because of the way the bandage was fixed under his jaw.

Bates stood at the end of the bed, his face looking gray and much older under the stubble of his beard.

"You got him," Bates said. "You took a lot of punishment, but by the time Tex and me got there, it was all over."

"I almost made a mistake." It was hard for Caleb to talk.

"You ain't lyin'," Tex remarked. "I don't greatly enjoy bein' on the business end of yore shooter."

Caleb let his eyelids flutter closed. He remembered now how it had come to him, out there by the window with Tex. There had been a similarity between the scrawled figures on the tally Rock had given him and the notes that had supposedly come from Kiner. So it had come to him like

that that the man he wanted was Rock Donovan. But that didn't explain things.

Bates was talking. Caleb looked at him and tried to listen.

"...so if you're puzzled, I got some other word by telegraph I didn't pass on. Len checked on your boys, as well as Kiner. Most drew blanks. A couple had records but the one that seemed mighty interestin' was that Rock Donovan had served some time with Kiner.

"When Rock got out he disappeared for a while, long enough maybe to dig out some of Kiner's stage loot, and then Rock showed up in Tanner with plenty of cash. He lived fast until it was gone and then he signed on with you. I figured maybe Kiner made a deal with Rock. Kiner wanted revenge on you and Gordon and he paid off Rock good for the job. But Rock put it off, until he heard Kiner was out. Then I reckon he figured he'd have to git it done mighty fast, knowin' Kiner wouldn't be interested in excuses from an hombre who took his pay and didn't produce."

Caleb nodded. He could understand it all, now. Rock was Kiner's shadow of vengeance.

"I wasn't sure, then," Bates went on. "Maybe I should have told you, but you were holding out on me so I held out on you. Between us we could have pieced it together. I didn't ride out the west trail, but I came back and waited. I got Tex to cover the other side of the house and we figured we'd get some action, because I had Len tip Rock that Kiner had been seen in town and so he'd have to finish his job fast. I guess that job included Molly, too. Actually, you don't need to fret any more. Kiner didn't go back behind bars. He ended up in Boothill, where he belongs."

Caleb thought, they work differently now, what with the telegraph so fast, and the gunmen are different, too, buying other men to do their

(please turn to page 127)

RING-TAILED RANNY

by
HASCAL
GILES

They had run him
out of Miles City.



The salty townsman with the big Frontier Colt held that Hardwicke Mason was lying in his teeth when he claimed he'd been Wild Bill's deputy—just like Mason had hired him to say!

CHAPTER ONE

TWENTY DOLLARS TOUGH

HARDWICKE MASON paid twenty dollars in gold to let him run Lew Slocum, a barfly he'd picked up in Miles City, him out of Red Butte. Lew Slocum figured he'd hit a windfall even at **HE BACKED HIS BLACKSTONE WITH BULLETS! . . . TENSE NOVELET!**

that, for riding seventy miles on the stage, doing a little play-acting, and then turning around and riding back to Miles City. Red Butte, of course, didn't know it was a put-up deal, and Hardwicke Mason expected to get a law practice established in the town without much trouble after that....

They'd stepped off the evening stage just before dusk, and the half dozen loungers who made a ritual of awaiting the arrival of the coach twice a week, didn't pay much attention to them until they started arguing. Right away it was plain this was going to be no ordinary stage run, and folks were putting their money on Lew Slocum, even though they had never seen him before.

Hardwicke Mason just didn't look the part. He had a fine, sensitive face and his black broadcloth suit put the mark of the tenderfoot on him. He was a tall, well-made man, but his dark eyes were more of the dreaming than the fighting kind. Lew Slocum was cut from the same mould as most of the men who sat propped back in the chairs under the wooden awning of the stage station: short and chunky, clothed in dust-spotted levis and flannel shirt, and with a big Frontier Colt buckled low on his right thigh.

Nobody was able to determine exactly what the trouble was about, but Slocum's voice was loud when he said, "Lawyer man, I say you're a big bag of wind. I say you're lyin' in your teeth when you claim you ever was Wild Bill's deputy, and I aim to tell everybody in Red Butte what a four-flusher you are!"

Very slowly, and somewhat dramatically, Hardwicke Mason unbuttoned his long coat and let the tails fall back to reveal the two pearl-handled pistols riding snugly against his lean hips. The reaction in front of the stage station was the same as if someone had dropped a lighted stick of dynamite on the boardwalk. Spurs jingled and high-heeled boots rattled

anxiously as the loungers scattered out, leaving the line of fire.

"I don't think you'll tell the people of Red Butte anything, mister," Hardwicke said. "I don't think you'll stay long enough. I'm going to make my home here, and I don't want to be bothered by such as you. Now get back on that coach and ride it to where you came from!"

The heavy-set man hesitated, and Hardwicke said, "Maybe you didn't get the name, mister. It's Mason—Hardwicke Mason."

That set up some sort of reaction in Lew Slocum, it appeared, and he took a step backward. "Well, maybe I did shoot off my mouth a little. But how was I to know—that you was Hardwicke Mason?"

The gaunt stage driver, who had stood aside without comment until now, spoke around his cud of tobacco as Hardwicke moved in on Lew Slocum.

"I don't rightly know how tough this Mason feller is, pard, but he talks like trouble. I'm pullin' out of here in a couple minutes, and I think it's best you go with me."

Hardwicke, who'd been walking forward with his hands stuffed into his trousers pockets, reached out now and grabbed Slocum by the shoulder and the seat of his pants, whirling him toward the open door of the stage-coach.

"He's going!" Hardwicke grunted.

Lew Slocum nodded, and crawled into the coach with a cowed expression on his beard-stubbed face. Hardwicke stooped then, passing his fingers into the dirt of the street and holding up a double eagle.

"I think you dropped this, mister," he said. Slocum took the gold piece, and nobody noticed that his voice was quite civil when he thanked Hardwicke Mason for the favor.

AFTER THE stage had gone, Ab Treadwell, the liveryman, hauled

Hardwicke's trunk and two big boxes of law books over to the Blue Star Hotel; and after Hardwicke had the things put away in his room, Ab invited him across the street for a drink at the Tomahawk Saloon.

Ab was a stiff-jointed, stoop-shouldered little man who smelled of hay and horses, and he hadn't been able to hear well since a mule kicked him in the head ten years back. So it wasn't uncommon that Ab had the young lawyer's name a trifle confused when he introduced him to the crowd at the Tomahawk bar.

"Gents," Ab Treadwell said to everyone in general, "I want you to make the acquaintance of 'Hardrock' Mason, Red Butte's new lawyer. And a ring-tailed rannihan he is, too!"

Hardwicke tried to correct the mistake Ab made, but he was unheard in the noisy greetings that followed, and after that no one in Red Butte ever called him anything except Hardrock Mason.

Most of the men who had seen the incident at the stage station were there, and they had told the others what had happened. People crowded around "Hardrock", shaking his hand and offering to buy him drinks. It was a new experience for him, and he soaked up attention like a dry-lot steer turned to water.

Hardrock felt proud of himself. He had proved a theory. Two days ago he had stood in another saloon like this, the Bow and Arrow in Miles City. There, men like these—big men with calloused hands, low-cut holsters and rough voices—had laughed and jeered at him. Because he knew little of cattle and horses, and could not pull a gun and threaten to belly-shoot the first man who crowded him too close, they had run him out. But he had come into Red Butte with guns on his own hips, and three people had seen another man bow to his will. It made a difference.

He had come here to prove he couldn't be denied the privilege of

other men's respect simply because he dressed differently and spoke differently, and the reception at the Tomahawk was a step toward success.

He stood up to the bar with his long coat gaped open, and his pearl-handled pistols glaring in the lamplight, drinking free liquor and talking more than he had since leaving St. Louis five months ago. They asked him questions, and Hardrock Mason made up some tall tales. He said he'd been in a few gunfights in his time, had worn a lawman's badge for a while, and then had taken up the study of law. The conversation led naturally to a discussion of local talent, and they told Hardrock Red Butte had seen its share of gunmen, too.

"You ever hear of a feller name of Trav Tillman?" the bartender asked. "Reckon he's the toughest bucko these parts ever knowed."

AS HARDROCK hesitated, Ab Treadwell spoke up. "If he ever rode with Hickock, I reckon he's bound to have run into Trav. It was Hickock who finally stood up to Trav, outmatched him and throwed him in jail."

Hardrock breathed a sigh of relief. "Sure, I know that sidewinder. Why, I was right beside Wild Bill when the showdown came. Jail's the place for him, too."

The bartender pushed another drink under Hardrock's hand. "Then I reckon you'll be an answer to Bob Ransom's prayers, son. Bob has shore took a-plenty from Trav Tillman and that brother Grady of his."

Hardrock almost choked on the drink at his lips. He set the glass down, looking at the bartender in surprise. "You mean Trav isn't in jail any more?"

"Ain't been in six months. Otherwise Oliver Dublin might still be here to offer you some competition in the law business."

Right at that moment, Hardrock

Mason didn't feel like the answer to anyone's prayer; he felt like he needed one. When you start talking public in the cow country about a man who prides himself on his skill with guns and fists, that man usually makes it a point to look you up.

The two pearl-handled guns were beginning to make Hardrock feel conspicuous. Had it been convenient, he would have been tempted to return them to the hardware store where he'd purchased them just before leaving Miles City. He buttoned his fine broadcloth coat over the gaudy weapons, excused himself with a wave of his hand, and started to his room.

Ab Treadwell followed him to the door of the saloon to ask a question:

"Case I should be out toward the B-in-a-Box any time soon, could I be safe in tellin' Bob Ransom you'd take his case? Bob needs some help."

"Well, Ab," Hardrock began, "I'd rather wait a little..." He paused, noticing the way the liveryman's eyes were narrowing with his words. Hardrock squared his jaw, and said loud enough for all the men behind Ab Treadwell to hear: "I'll take any case so long as I believe the man's in the right. I came here to practice law."

Ab Treadwell grinned, nodding his head in vigorous approval. "That's good enough for me, pard. Any man with a daughter fine as Lily Ransom can't be far wrong on anything!"

CHAPTER TWO

TEXAS GIRL

IT MUST have been a special trip Ab Treadwell made to the B-in-a-Box instead of a happen-chance, for two days later Hardrock had his first client.

He had rented an office over Les Shiloh's general store, finding it as conveniently furnished as if it had been arranged for his coming. It looked out over Red Butte's single,

red dust street and held an eastern-made desk and plenty of bookshelves. Les Shiloh told him it was the former office of a lawyer named Oliver Dublin, but he could offer little explanation as to why Dublin no longer occupied it.

"He just sort of had a notion to move on," Shiloh said around a big cud of tobacco. "Some say him and Trav Tillman had a mite of a ruckus up here night before Dublin pulled up stakes and left. But I don't go pokin' into other people's business, and I wouldn't know about that."

Lily Ransom told Hardrock more about Dublin. She was waiting for him when he came back from lunch. When Hardrock pushed open the door and stepped into his office that day he was sure the scorching Montana sun in the street had followed him up here to tease him with mirages. And then she spoke, and he felt better about his senses.

Her voice was soft and drawling as she introduced herself, the words hanging on her lips as if they hated to part with such lovely company. "I hope you don't mind my making myself at home here while you were out."

Hardrock stood stone still, but his eyes were busy. He had good reason to suspect she was a mirage. Her long blonde hair seemed to have a lot of the sun caught in it, and her rather wide blue eyes were as crystal clear as the Montana sky after a summer shower. She was wearing a black-checked gingham dress with a close-fitting white bodice, and Hardrock noticed that the doe-tan of her face was shared by much of her clear skin. The firm swell of her bosom above the square-necked bodice gave only a hint of the whiteness that began where the sun did not touch.

Hardrock's first thought found its way to his lips. He let his breath go rather suddenly, and said, "They sure didn't have anything like you in Miles City!"

Lily Ransom's cheeks colored slight-

ly, and she moved as if she might reply to his brashness by getting up and leaving. Then she reconsidered, accepting it as a compliment.

"You should have tried Texas," she laughed.

That was the end of her light-heartedness. The remark seemed to remind her of unpleasantness, and she sobered quickly, following Hardrock with a solemn glance as he walked around to the desk and sat down, facing her.

"I certainly hope you're as much of a man as the town thinks you are, Mr. Mason," she said. "If you are, we need you desperately."

A warm feeling ran over Hardrock's face at the thought of being needed by someone as beautiful as the girl in front of him. "Then let's get started off right. You call me Hardwicke, and I'll call you Lily. All right?"

Her forehead furrowed questioningly. "I thought Ab Treadwell said it was Hardrock."

"That's what I said—Hardrock," he lied glibly, knowing from the change in her expression that the difference in names was important in a town like this. "Now what kind of legal advice do you need, Lily?"

She arose and came to stand at the corner of the desk while she talked. He found her studying his face much as he had hers. She had expected to find a balding, bespectacled man like Oliver Dublin, and she was pleased that he was different. She was as much at ease in his presence as if she had known him a long time.

"Mr. Dublin told us it was an injunction—a sort of restraining order to keep people from running over other people when they have no right."

Hardwicke nodded. "A very common procedure among more...well, back East. And whom do you wish to restrain?"

"Grady Tillman. And maybe that gun-toting brother of his, too."

"You mean Trav Tillman?"

Lily Ransom tossed her silken hair as if mention of the name angered her.

"He shot half a dozen men around here and got away with it, they say, but Marshal Hickock finally got him in jail for a year at Hays. Now he's back from his rambling, mean as ever. I think Grady Tillman sent for him just to make trouble for me and Dad."

Hardrock Mason started thumbing through an open book of statutes on his desk to keep Lily Ransom from seeing how his hands were shaking.

"You will take the case, won't you—Hardrock?"

She leaned so close to ask the question that he could smell the cactus-blossom scent of her hair. He looked straight into her eyes, and, during the brief pause that followed, realized that whatever his decision was, it would be on a very personal basis. Lily seemed to be aware of this, too, for her breath quickened and a slight tremor touched her lips, like she wanted to deny it.

"Yes, Lily," Hardrock said. "I'll take the case."

IT WAS ALL backward from good legal procedure, Hardrock knew, for it was not until he had committed himself that he learned the details of the case.

Bob Ransom and his daughter had come up with a trail herd from Texas three months ago. They had intended selling their cattle in Miles City, but a minor stampede just before they reached the railhead had upset their plans. Bob Ransom's horse had fallen in the melee, and the cattleman had broken a leg.

For a man Ransom's age, a broken leg would take a long time to heal, and he forgot about returning to Texas. His only tie there was a lonely grave, where he'd buried Lily's mother five years ago, and a man always had to make some sacrifice. Ransom kept a few stockers and moved on to Red Butte, looking for a place to settle.

The Missouri Pacific had once considered laying its track through Red Butte, and when it was shifted by way of Miles City the company was

left with a large section of range to dispose of. One large section, planned as feeding range for the railroad's own work stock, joined the free graze which Grady Tillman had been using for five years. It was up for auction the day the Masons arrived in Red Butte.

Grady Tillman knew that some day title would have to be acquired for all the western lands, and he saw the railroad section as his future stake. But, when the bidding started, Bob Ransom's daughter Lily stuck him out and bought the land.

"Since then," Lily explained, "he's been trying to freeze us out his own way. He's set up a hydraulicker right above our only stream, and he's washing so much mud and rubbish by our place the stream's filling up. Our stockers and the strays I've managed to round up to build us a herd are dying from lack of water, and there's nothing we can do about it."

"What's a hydraulicker?" Hardrock asked. "What's he hope to do with it?"

"Hydraulic pressure is one way of mining," Lily said. "Tillman has a steam engine up in Elk Canyon where Chinook Creek forks off to our place. He uses the engine to build up tremendous water pressure, and then turns it loose from a pipe with a kick that could knock over a freight train. He's tumbling half a mountain into the water we need to make the B-in-a-Box live. The worst part of it is, the old goat claims he's looking for gold, and there's no gold within a hundred miles of here. He knows that as well as we do, but he also knows cattle can't live without water."

Hardrock Mason's sense of right was so offended by Grady Tillman's deliberate vengeance he forgot about the dangers involved, and found himself recalling the many laws under which the man might be prosecuted in a place where custom had established the due process of courts as ordinary.

"He certainly can be stopped from

doing that, Lily. I don't understand why your man Dublin didn't go ahead with the injunction."

The girl sighed. "Neither do we. He said he would, and then Trav Tillman showed up in Red Butte. Early the next morning, Mr. Dublin came out to our place and said he couldn't handle the business. He had a black eye and his glasses were broken. But if Dad wasn't flat on his back with a game leg, Tillman would have been stopped long ago. We never needed a court to fight our battles in Texas."

"It's a good way, though," Hardrock said earnestly. "It's the right way—more right than looking down a gun barrel for your justice. I'll prove to you that it works."

Lily Ransom stood up, her face shining warmly. "That's what Dublin said, but—but I believe you, Hardrock."

She grasped his hand, and when Hardrock held on to it a moment she showed no impatience. Long after she had gone, he could still smell the sweet cactus-blossom scent she left behind her.

CHAPTER THREE

QUITTER'S PRICE

ABOUT AN hour after Lily Ransom left, the stage came in, but Hardrock did not bother to glance out as it clattered past his window. However, he smiled to himself about the memory of its previous arrival. In a little while there was a knock on his door, and Dave Burton, the gaunt, bowlegged stage driver, came in.

"This ain't rightly any of my business, Mason," Dave said, "but I was talkin' with Les Shiloh downstairs and it set me to frettin'. He tells me you're fixin' to tangle with Trav Tillman, maybe. The Ransom girl told him you was sidin' her against Grady's freeze-out deal, and when you buy one of them buckos you buy 'em both. I

was willin' to string along on that play with Ab Slocum, but I hate to see a man get his head shot off. Why don't you give up this fool notion, Mason?"

Hardrock chuckled bitterly. "And go back to Miles City, perhaps?"

"Shucks, Mason, the boys down there didn't mean no harm. They was just funnin' with you."

Hardrock stood up and walked over to the window, looking beyond the barren town and into the sweep of dark hills that stood out in their pine-studded coats against the spotless sky. The anger he felt the day he left Miles City was in his voice as he spoke.

"You call it funnin' when folks make a full-grown man feel like an addled child? That's what I thought it was, too, for a while; but it didn't end. It was really stealing, Dave. They were stealing my self-respect and my dignity as a man. My business is law, and people don't pay money for advice from a man they can laugh at. And you know what happened when I tried to do something about it."

Hardrock smiled thinly, remembering that last night when he'd stood in the Bow and Arrow and told the men around him how unfair they had been. That was one more mistake, added to the many he'd made.

It had been another joke. The man next to him at the bar guffawed and slapped him playfully on the shoulder. This sent Hardrock lurching into another cattleman, who shoved back. In another minute the two men had Hardrock bouncing between them like a pendulum on a clock, and the whole place roaring.

Finally, Hardrock could stand no more of it. He swung a fist at the big cattleman. The man merely ducked, grabbing Hardrock's wrist and shoving a shoulder into his middle. A sharp jerk on Hardrock's arm then sent him sailing across the man's back and halfway to the door, where he landed joltingly on his haunches. As Hardrock got up and walked outside

with the laughter pounding in his ears, he knew he had failed finally and permanently in Miles City. He could not face those men again.

"But they taught me a lesson down there," Hardrock said to the stage driver. "They taught me this country doesn't want brains; it wants guts!"

Dave Burton rubbed his chin and looked worried. "Then why don't you go back East?"

"The East is full of young squirts like me trying to get ahead." Hardrock returned to the desk and sat down, feeling tired. "That's why I came West. I could scrape together a living like the rest of them, I guess, but with me it's a little different. I'm a Mason. In St. Louis that means law. For as far back as I've explored the family tree, the Masons have been adjutants and judges and high counsel for the fur companies and railroads. I'd feel awfully little if I went back to St. Louis and told my father I'm not as good as the rest of them. It would be a failure for him, too, so I'm going to prove I am. I've found respect in Red Butte, something every man likes, and a girl who could give a man like me courage to grow big with this country. The only way I'll ever leave here is in a coffin."

The stage driver moved toward the door, fingering his battered hat uneasily. "From what I hear they may arrange that for you. I feel guilty about bein' a party to this. Maybe I should go out and tell what Ab Slocum's little speech threatened to do. I might save your life that way."

Hardrock chuckled at the man's disappearing back. "I doubt if they'd believe you."

THE NEXT DAY Hardrock Mason got Les Shiloh, who also served as justice of the peace for Red Butte, to process the injunction. Later he took it over to the jail to get Sheriff Clay Watson to serve it on Grady Tillman.

It was a new demand on authority

for Clay, and he wasn't enthused about it. He sat behind a cluttered desk with his feet propped up, and kept rolling his rowelled spurs back and forth across the scarred top while he read the legal-looking document. He finished with his fat jowls quivering and turned piggish brown eyes on Hardrock Mason.

"Exactly, what does all this 'cease' and 'desist' business in here mean? I don't like the looks of it. You're gettin' set to stir up a mess of trouble here, Mason."

"The mess was stirred up when I got here, Sheriff," Hardrock said, "and apparently you've done nothing to interfere with it one way or another. The injunction merely says that Grady Tillman has to close down his hydraulicking operation or find another way to dispose of the wastes from it. It's sort of a no trespass notice. Tillman's dirt is trespassing on B-in-a-Box water, and Bob Ransom's stock is dying. That's all."

Clay Watson's sweat-slick face had a harried look. "And what if Grady don't do it?"

"Then he's liable for damages and a jail sentence. I want that served today, Sheriff."

"Sure," Clay Watson said. "But I want it understood this is personal between you and Bob Ransom and Grady Tillman. I don't like to get mixed up in no personal fights."

"I've heard as much," said Hardrock.

Since the evening of his arrival, Hardrock had spent little time at the Tomahawk Saloon, but he went there now. He had felt his nerves contracting uncomfortably within him ever since Lily Ransom's visit, and, now that the last step was taken, he needed something to distract his thoughts from what was ahead.

The welcome at the Tomahawk was as hearty as ever. Hardrock accepted a drink on the house, and then fell into the pattern he'd followed from the first, talking of a wild life in

many wild towns. But tonight he did it to build his own courage, rather than to make an impression. He stayed until the saloon closed. When he finally went to his room at the hotel, he was so warmed by whisky that he slept with an untroubled mind.

His mind was still somewhat fuzzy the next morning about ten o'clock, however, and that was why the half-smoked cigarette which lay still burning outside his office door failed to make any impression on him as he entered. The only lock to the upstairs rooms was at the bottom of the stairway, and Les Shiloh usually unfastened all the doors as he opened the store. A moment later Hardrock was fully awake. When he pushed the office door open and stepped inside he ran straight into the cool barrel of a gun.

The man behind the six-shooter was big and beefy, and he had a flat-crowned hat pulled low over his cold black eyes. Hardrock's face turned pale, and he took a deep breath before trying to speak.

"I suppose you're Trav Tillman," he said.

The big man's voice growled in his neck like the snort of an angry bull. "Wrong, bucko. I'm Grady. Funny you'd mistake us. Folks tell me you and Trav are right well acquainted."

"Well—it's been a long time."

"Yeah," Grady Tillman grinned tightly. "Ain't it, though? But Trav's too busy soakin' up liquor over at the Tomahawk to palaver right now. Me and you have got some talkin' to do about a piece of paper Clay Watson brought me yesterday."

Hardrock started to move toward his desk. His legs felt watery and he wanted to sit down, but Grady Tillman shoved the gun barrel hard into his chest and stopped him.

"The paper means what it says," Hardrock said, eyeing the gun nervously.

A sound came from Grady Tillman's thick neck that could have been

either a laugh or a curse. "You can be sensible like Oliver Dublin or be dead, bucko. Take your choice. I'll give you two hundred dollars to catch the next stage out of Red Butte."

Hardrock raised his solemn dark eyes from the gun to the leathery face in front of him. Anger strengthened him for a moment, and he almost shouted his answer at the man.

"I wouldn't leave here for ten times that, Tillman! You can't find enough money to buy me!"

Grady Tillman was fast for a man of his hulk. Hardrock hardly saw the arm move as the man whipped the gun aside, and there was only a brief streak of pain as the barrel smacked him across the temple. Hardrock went wilting down at the big cattleman's feet. He grabbed at Tillman's legs for support, but his hands didn't touch a thing....

CHAPTER FOUR

EVEN FIGHT

LILY RANSOM found him lying there twenty minutes later, and it was only after she had wet her handkerchief in a basin of water and wrung it out over his face several times that Hardrock Mason opened his eyes and looked up.

Hardrock grinned weakly, fighting the bells in his head. "They really do come true. I was lying there asleep dreaming about a pretty girl, and when I open my eyes, there she is."

Lily ran the handkerchief gently along the raw gash on his temple, and showed him the bloodstains. "Some sleep!"

Feeling groggy, Hardrock got to his feet and managed to reach the desk chair and sit down without stumbling. Lily Ransom followed him, her fingers clinging warmly to his arm.

"Grady Tillman dropped in," he said.

"I knew they'd come here. You

can't go on with this, Hardrock. That's why I came to town. I—I don't want anything to happen to you, and this is no job for a St. Louis man."

Surprise made Hardrock feel like he'd been hit by the gun again. "What did you say? How—"

"A grubline rider passed the B-in-a-Box this morning. A man named Lew Slocum. Dad mentioned your name, and he laughed himself hoarse. He told us about the money you paid him to run from you."

Reality came crashing down on Hardrock like a thousand pound steer, and with almost the same jolting shock. He felt embarrassed and angry and ashamed all at the same time.

Hardrock chuckled cynically. "Good old Lew. I guess I look pretty silly to you now, Lily. A boy playing bad-man. But I do know law," he added defensively. "All I need is a chance to do something with it."

Lily Ransom's long hair brushed softly against Hardrock's cheek as she leaned close and put a hand on his shoulder. "You look great to me, Hardrock. It took a lot of nerve to do what you've been doing."

"Then I won't let a knock on the head stop me," Hardrock said determinedly.

The girl's grip on his shoulder tightened. "But don't you see, Hardrock? They won't stop at that. It was just a warning. They'll beat you up good next time, and if you still don't run then Grady will send Trav Tillman to finish the job."

"He's already here."

They had not known of Ab Treadwell's presence until he spoke from the doorway. The old liveryman came on into the room now, looking happy about the whole situation. His mouth was spread in a toothless grin, and his face flushed with excitement.

"Trav's over at the Tomahawk, and he's right smart likkered up. He's layin' the lie to all you've said about him, Hardrock. He sent me for you.

He said if you didn't show up in ten minutes he'd come after you."

Ab Slocum turned and hobbled back down the steps. It was so quiet above Les Shiloh's store that Hardrock could hear Lily Ransom's quick breathing.

"There's the answer, Lily," Hardrock said. "Trav Tillman represents all that's tough and wild here. Knock him off that perch, and that kind of living falls with him. His brother Grady will fold up his hydraulicking machine and leave you alone when he knows he can't hide behind Trav."

"But you can't do it, Hardrock," Lily said earnestly. "You don't know anything about those fancy guns you're wearing, and Trav Tillman is the fastest—"

"What happens to you, Lily," Hardrock interrupted, "when a man out here sends for you to 'back up big talk and you don't go?'"

Lily Ransom's face sobered, but she did not answer him. Hardrock believed she was sincere in her fear for him, but he knew also that a Texas girl would never settle for anything less than a man who answered his challenges.

Hardrock stood up, easing her hands off his shoulders. "I've always been funny about appointments, Lily. Like to get there on time. That ten minutes is about up."

"You don't stand a chance," she said, holding onto him a moment.

Hardrock mustered a grin. "But Trav Tillman doesn't know that, Lily."

THE TOMAHAWK Saloon had a good crowd, but it looked like it was empty. They were huddled around the walls, shifting uneasily from foot to foot or just staring at the man who stood alone at the bar. The bartender was well away from him, polishing glasses with unconscious industry at the other end of the long mahogany counter.

Hardrock paused in the doorway of the saloon, unbuttoning his long broad cloth coat and pushing the tails back

behind his two pearl-handled guns. Then he walked slowly toward the bar. Perspiration was running from under his arms, and the pit of his stomach felt like it was full of icicles.

Trav Tillman whirled to face him, his thin face full of fury. "So you're the ring-tailed ranny that helped Wild Bill run me in?" He laughed disdainfully, cutting the sound off suddenly in his throat. He grabbed his empty whisky glass and slapped it down on the bar, bottom up. "I'm sayin' that's a lie, pilgrim, and where I come from that means you've got a fight on your hands!"

Trav Tillman was as unlike his brother as beef and mutton. He was a tall, stringy man with a pasty face and milk-blue eyes. He had on patched and faded levis, and his two brush-polished holsters sagged almost to his knees. Hardrock Mason could look into that cold-eyed face and know it was mean. But the man also looked soft. He had lived easy and depended too much on his guns.

Hardrock had come here without any definite plan as to how he would conduct himself, but now a sort of ragged strategy began to shape up in his mind. It all had to do with something he had read somewhere—that a wise general always fought on a field of his own choosing.

"Somebody's lied all right," Hardrock said. "You don't look much like the man who was tough enough to stand up to Wild Bill, either. Maybe you've been fooling people around here. Maybe you never even saw Wild Bill. That would be a pretty good story for a man who let just an ordinary sheriff throw him in jail."

Trav Tillman took a step forward, his fingers spread out like crow's feet above his guns. "These people know me," he growled.

"But they don't know who put you in jail. There's only one way to prove that. The man we took in was willing to drop his guns and fight Wild Bill

with his fists. You want to prove you're that tough, Trav Tillman?"

Hardrock Mason was lying, Trav Tillman knew. He'd never seen the man before in his life, and Wild Bill Hickock didn't shuck his guns for anybody. But that's the way this pilgrim was telling the story, and Trav could judge by the low murmur from the wall-hugging crowd that half the people believed him. He was confused by the turn things were taking. He had been boasting for an hour what he would do to Hardrock Mason, how he would make him eat his words about ever having laid a hand on Trav Tillman; and now this fast-talking man in the preacher suit was making him look like a bag of wind, himself.

"You asked for it, pilgrim," Trav Tillman said angrily. He wrenched at his belt buckle and the heavy guns thudded to the floor.

Hardrock Mason was not so careless with his expensive weapons. He unfastened the two pearl-handled colts and laid them on the bar. As far as he was concerned this was an even fight now. He hadn't been in a fist fight since he was a boy, but growing up shouldn't make such a difference. Except for size, they might as well have been two kids brawling over a pet bobcat.

FOR YEARS after it happened, people in Red Butte were still debating whether Hardrock made his stand that day on guts or brains; and even Hardrock was never sure. Part of what happened in the Tomahawk was plain luck, he figured, and part of it was simply a man profiting by a past mistake. Trav Tillman didn't know much about fighting with his fists, either, and he came running at Hardrock with his arms flailing. A fist caught Hardrock on the nose, and he staggered back against the bar. Blood dripped from his nose and from the gash along his temple which opened up under the shock of the blow.

When Hardrock staggered, Trav

Tillman slipped off him and went past. By the time the gunman caught his balance and got turned around, Hardrock's head was clear enough to think again.

Tillman's awkwardness reminded Hardrock of his own vain attempt at fighting in the Miles City saloon, and that's why he did what he did. As Trav Tillman rushed him again, Hardrock braced and waited. He caught one of the man's arms, threw his hip into Tillman's middle, and then twisted around. He yanked down on the arm across his shoulder like it was a pump handle, ducking slightly, and Travis Tillman went catapulting through the air like an uncoiling lasso rope. The crowd spread out to make way for him, and Trav Tillman crashed into the wall, head and shoulders first. He hit so hard the whole building trembled, and one of the brass lanterns hanging above the bar bounced off its hook.

It was hard to say who was the more surprised, Trav Tillman or Hardrock Mason, but the fight ended there. Trav didn't move for a minute, and then he sat up and shook his head dazedly, like he didn't believe it had happened. Hardrock moved toward him, but Trav waved him back.

"No," Trav said. "No— I've had enough."

Folks in the Tomahawk thought it was funny the way Trav Tillman sat there in the floor with his face skinned up, and they laughed at him. Trav clambered to his feet, head down, and walked to the bar. He picked up his guns and stomped outside without looking back. Hardrock Mason laughed a little, too, for the jeers in the saloon had made his victory complete. Trav Tillman would not return. He would pack up and leave Red Butte, now, for he no longer held either the fear or respect of the town. They had laughed at him.

Ab Treadwell slapped Hardrock on the back and offered to buy him a
(please turn to page 129)

TRIGGER TRIAL OF

CHAPTER I

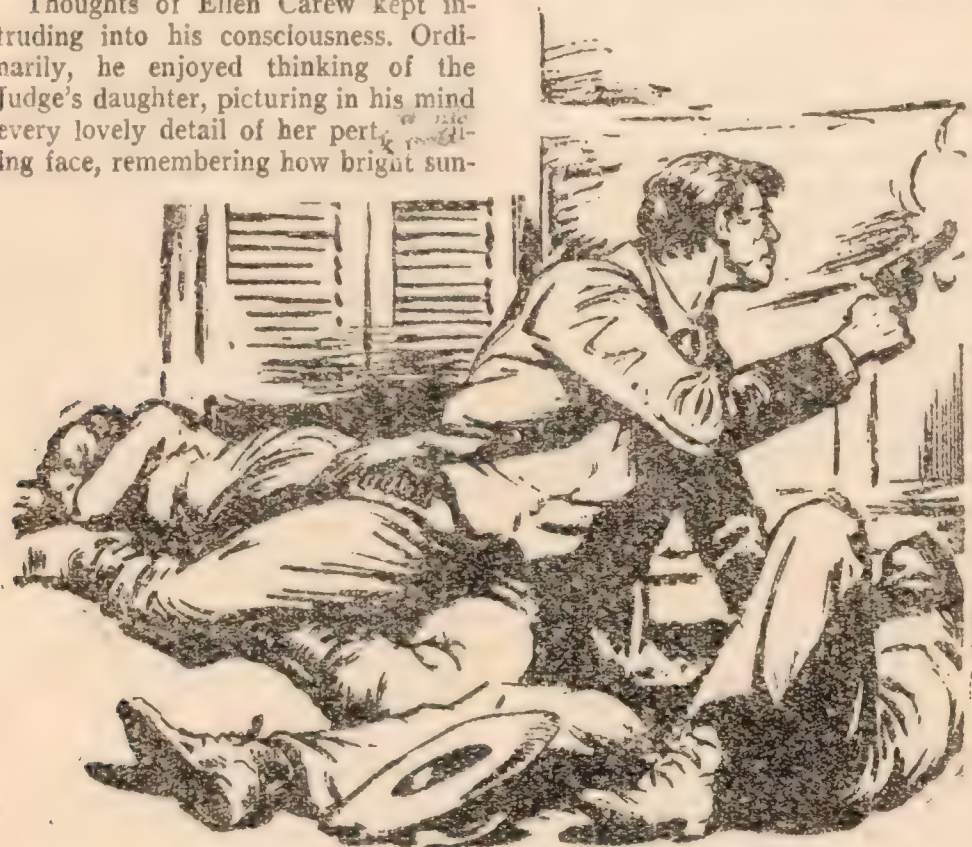
"WE'LL BE BACK, LAWDOG!"

BART COREY'S blue-gray eyes held a distant, half-troubled look as he rode out of the timber on Scalped Squaw Creek. During the long, dusty ride from Elk City, he had found it increasingly hard to keep his mind fixed on the chore that had brought him to this remote and lonely canyon in the hills.

Thoughts of Ellen Carew kept intruding into his consciousness. Ordinarily, he enjoyed thinking of the Judge's daughter, picturing in his mind every lovely detail of her pert, smiling face, remembering how bright sun-

light had a way of outlining her chestnut hair with bold touches of pure gold. What brought the frown to his face now was the prospect that soon she might get married—and not to Bart Corey.

That idea would have seemed ridiculous as recently as six months ago. But that was before Duane Northrup had arrived in Elk City to take a teller's job in his uncle's bank and acquaint himself with the business. Since the dapper, black-haired young man had put in his appearance four



IF IT CAME TO A FIGHT, BART COREY WOULDN'T HAVE TRADED ALL THE SYNDICATE SIXGUNS IN THE SOUTHWEST FOR HIS LONE LAW-BACKED CUTTER!

THE

XT

by **HARRISON
COLT**

months ago, Bart thought he detected a subtle change in the girl's attitude toward him.

She was still as warm and friendly as ever. But in the last few weeks, it seemed to him, she had managed it so that they spent far less of their

time in each other's company. For a while, it had been more or less taken for granted that Bart would be the one to escort her to the church socials and Saturday night dances. Lately, however, young Northrup had been her partner far oftener than he had.



Then a bullet from Bart's gun took him in the chest . . .

Bart Corey didn't consider that the odds were stacked against him. Sure, it was one gun against the filed triggers of the giant XT's numerous Colt-handy crew—but he also had his badge, and to Bart that symbolized the backing of every law-abiding citizen of the county!

It seemed that no matter how far ahead he asked her, the banker's nephew had spoken first.

But a moment later, as he swung the blaze-faced roan from the dimness of the trees and came out into the sloping meadow, his gloomy speculations were broken into. Sunlight painted the sweep of grass a raw yellow and struck blindingly at his eyes. He started to move up toward the sagging-roofed cabin that had once served as a line shack for the Double D outfit, now long defunct.

Then he suddenly stiffened in his saddle, focused his gaze through the brilliant sun-glare. Instantly, he touched spurs to the roan's flanks and sent the animal at a quick lope toward a tall cottonwood standing a short distance off to one side of the cabin.

THE DOZEN or so mounted men gathered under the tree swung around at his approach, eyeing him sharply. Bart had the distinct impression that he was not welcome. A moment later, this was made unmistakably clear.

A thick-shouldered, barrel-bodied man in expensive, if badly wrinkled, town clothes swung his large black stallion across the lawman's path. Bart saw with a stir of wonder that it was Mort Westrum, big boss of the far-flung XT iron. The man called out, in a deep and angry voice:

"Stay out of this, Corey! I won't stand for any interference on your part, and I don't care if you're wearin' that piece of tin on your shirt or not! Yqu understand? This is an XT matter and we intend to handle it ourselves!"

Bart pulled up. His glance went to the tall, sorrel-topped man who sullenly sat his horse a little apart from the rest of the riders. His hands were tied behind him and his neck was encircled by the knotted loop of a rope tossed over a limb of the tall tree.

Bart said, "Tell me, Westrum. What's Red Mabery done to get himself invited to this neck-stretching party?"

Westrum frowned, but after a moment's hesitation, he said: "Maberry's guilty of rustlin' XT stock. I had my suspicions of him before, but this time we caught him red-handed. If you ride up the canyon a couple of miles, you'll find the stolen steers hidden away in a small box canyon."

Red Maberry broke in at this point. He yelled, in a hoarse, rage-shaken voice, "That's a damn pack of lies, Sheriff! If there's any XT cow stuff up this canyon, it's because Westrum had it driven there! He has his own reasons for wanting to see me stretch hemp and it ain't got nothing to do with stolen cattle!"

Westrum darted an infuriated glance back across one beefy shoulder. "Shut up, Mabery! You can't lie your way out of this!"

Red Mabery showed his white teeth in a mirthless grin. "Why should I shut up? Now that the sheriff's here, I got a few things to tell him. Fer instance, if he'd like to know how those XT hides come to be found on Jamison's place. And maybe he'd like to know about Judge Carew and the money—"

"Shut up, you!" One of the XT men—a pinch-faced, skinny rider named Larkin—swung his horse close to the red-head's side. He snatched a gun from his holster and jabbed it against Mabery's ribs. Then he leaned forward and whispered something in his ear.

Mabery eyed the gun pressing against his side, swallowed hard, and fell silent.

Westrum said hastily, "Mabery's had it in for me ever since I kicked him off the XT payroll last March. He'd do anything under the sun to stir up trouble and get even. But I know you got too level a head on your shoulders, Sheriff, to listen to his wild talk. A man in his boots—"

Bart interrupted, "I wish you'd tell your rider to put away his gun, Westrum. This whole business has a very peculiar smell. It's the first time I've ever seen a posse refuse an accused man a chance to tell his side of the story."

A DARK surge of blood stained the fleshy cheeks of the XT ranch manager. "Damn you, Corey!" he blurted. "I told you I wouldn't stand for you pokin' your nose into XT's business! This man's run off XT beef and he's goin' to hang for it! There's nothin' you can do about it, so you might as well turn your horse around and ride out of here! Boys, I think we'll get on with what we came here to do!"

Westrum wheeled the big black around and started to spur away.

"Hold on, Westrum!" Bart Corey had slid the gun from his holster and lined it on the broad back of the XT boss. The action was so smooth and sudden that none of the XT hands had a chance to reach for their own weapons. They eyed him with an almost comical surprise.

Westrum hawled the black to an abrupt halt, and heaved his bulky frame about in the saddle. At sight of the leveled six-shooter in Bart's hand, his eyes widened and he caught his breath sharply.

Bart said, "Mabery's coming back to town with me—under arrest. There he'll get a trial as prescribed by law, and a jury will decide his guilt or innocence."

Westrum shook his head slowly, a shocked look in his eyes. He was a man used to riding roughshod over the wishes of others, a man totally unaccustomed to having his will thwarted. On XT range his word was law, and seldom did he venture beyond the boundaries of this vast cattle empire he managed for the benefit of the owners, a syndicate of powerful Eastern businessmen. Years of cringing deference on the part of smaller

men had given him a solid core of arrogance and self-esteem which had seldom been challenged.

After this brief moment of silence, Westrum suddenly seemed to regain control of his vocal chords. His voice was harsh and biting, as he called out, "Put away that gun, Corey! You're just one man against a dozen! Only a rattle-brained idiot would take on that kind of odds!"

Bart's mouth tightened. "There's one thing you don't seem to understand, Westrum. I'm the sheriff of this county, and I've taken an oath to enforce the law! I aim to try my best to do just that. And you're wrong if you think the odds are stacked against me. I've got every decent, law-abiding citizen of the county standing behind me. Maybe you're right about me not getting out alive if this turned into a shooting showdown! But if that happens you might have cause to regret it. I don't think even you and XT are so big you can shoot down a lawman and get away with it!"

Westrum did not stir for several moments. He stared at Bart with smouldering eyes, but eyes in which the slightest gleam of caution had appeared. Finally he heaved a gusty sigh.

"All right, Corey," he grunted. "You win. This time. But remember this. XT has a habit of rememberin' who its friends and enemies are. After the election, you'll be out of a job! I'll see to that personally!"

Bart grinned. "Seems to me I didn't get an awful lot of support from XT in the last election. Or is my memory at fault?"

Westrum made no reply. Instead he swung his hand and called out, "Come on, boys. Let's get out of here!"

The skinny man who'd jabbed his gun into Mabery's side to silence him, returned the weapon to his holster with a frown. Before following his companions, he had a last word for the red-headed man. "We'll be back,

Red, and next time you'll swing! XT allus settles up its accounts! Well, adios, for now!"

Red Mabery watched the group of men ride off across the meadow, his facial muscles stiff with hate. "Next time we meet, Larkin," he called after the skinny man, "I intend to settle some accounts of my own!"

CHAPTER II

AMBUSHER

WITH Red Mabery riding at his side, Bart devoted the next couple of hours to a careful search of the upper canyon. From time to time, a frown creased his brow, as though something preyed on his mind.

Several times he reined in the roan and seemed about to address some question to the red-headed man jogging along beside him. But each time he clamped his mouth shut and rode on.

Without difficulty he located the small box canyon three miles above the cabin that Westrum had mentioned. Although he combed it over with painstaking thoroughness, however, he failed to come across a single XT cow.

Red Mabery gave a triumphant chuckle. "You satisfied now, Sheriff?" he demanded "I told you Westrum was lying. He was hoping you'd ride up here to take a look. Of course, by the time you got back—even though he'd have given his promise not to harm me in the meantime—I'd have been dangling from the cottonwood, just a hunk of vulture bait."

Bart had pulled up his horse just outside the canyon entrance. Here a shallow stream spilled down from higher ground and made its way noisily down the slope until it emptied into Scalped Squaw Creek. He stared down at the stretch of sandy bank, frowning slightly.

Then, like a man arriving at a sudden decision, he looked up, fixing his glance on Mabery's face. "Red," he said slowly, "back there by the cabin you started to say something before Larkin stopped you. What was it you were going to tell me?"

The cheery grin on Mabery's features faded a little. He regarded Bart with a certain wariness. "Oh, that?" he said carefully. "Well, you know how it is, Sheriff. A man with a noose around his neck is likely to say 'most anything."

"You mentioned those hides found buried on the Jamison claim on Goose Creek," persisted the lawman. "The hides that sent Jamison and three of his neighbors to jail on charges of butchering XT beef. Sounded like you were suggesting that Westrum had those hides planted there. That right, Red?"

Red licked his lips uneasily. Bart could sense the struggle going on within him. For a moment he seemed about to nod his head. But then something flickered in his eyes and he said, with a shrug of his sturdy shoulders, "It's no use asking me about those things, Sheriff. I reckon I got kinda rattled and said the first thing that popped into my mind. Of course, there wasn't any truth in it."

Bart's mouth tightened in disgust. He knew Mabery wasn't remaining silent out of any loyalty to Westrum or his former saddle-mates, all of whom he hated with a complete and bitter rancor. Rather it was the fear of incriminating himself that held him back.

"And Judge Carew.... I suppose you didn't mean anything by that reference to him either?"

Red Mabery shook his head. "I reckon it couldn't have been important. It seems to have plumb slipped my mind."

Bart said, "Okay, Red. If you're not willing to do any talking, I reckon we might as well hit the trail back to Elk City."

"Elk City?" Red's tone was faintly startled. "What give you the idea I was riding to Elk City?"

"Oh, I dunno, Red. Maybe because that's where the jail is."

"Jail?" Red's jaw had gone slack and he was staring, wide-eyed. "What the devil you mean? Am I under arrest?"

"I reckon so."

"Hell, you can't arrest me! What's the charge?"

"Cattle-rustling."

The red-headed man eyed the lawman with a look of almost pitying wonder. "Cattle-rustling? Man, you must be crazy! Ain't you just seen that everything Westrum said about his cows being up this side canyon was lies?"

Bart said, "I'm not so sure about that. The canyon may have been empty now, but there was plenty of sign that some cattle had been held there. And not too long ago, neither."

"If there was, I had nothing to do with it."

"Red, you want to know why I rode up here to Graveyard Canyon? Oldham—he's sheriff over to the next county—wrote me a letter saying that he'd picked up a gent selling beef to the railroad camps thereabouts. Seems Oldham had his suspicions of where the beef was coming from. Anyhow, this gent was discovered with nearly a dozen stolen beef cattle in his possession, most of them choice XT steers. He admitted buying them from a red-headed man at Eagle Pass five days ago."

"Look, Sheriff, I ain't the only galoot in these parts with red hair!" protested Mabery, worry glinting in his eyes.

"I'll grant that. But you are the only red-head who fits the description of the seller to the last detail. And, further, this gent admits the traffic in stolen beef has been going on for some time."

Red Mabery was silent for a while, his eyes narrowed in thought. He said

finally, "I admit maybe things do look a little stacked against me. But you'll find out when we reach Elk City that you got the wrong man. I never long-looped anybody's cows!"

AN HOUR later, moving down through the dark pines that thickly clothed the upper slopes of Bearcat, Red Mabery urged his bay mare closer to Bart's side. "I been thinking, Sheriff. What if I told you what you wanted to know? Would that make things any easier for me on this rustling charge?"

"It might, Red. Any help you give us will count in your favor."

Red nodded "I reckon that's good enough for me."

While Bart listened carefully, the red-head told his story. He revealed how XT riders had paid a midnight visit to nester soil. How they had driven several of their own beef animals onto Jamison's place, butchered them, and made what would seem to be crude attempts to hide all evidence of what had happened. The hides with their incriminating XT brands had been disposed of in a shallow trench, the carcasses dragged into a nearby shed.

As he listened, Bart's mind went back to the morning that Judge Carrew had brought a sharp-featured young man named Danvers to see him at the jail. Danvers, a clerk at the Stockmen's Hotel, had rattled off a glib tale of having seen Jamison and three other Goose Creek nesters butcher several head of cattle and bury the hides. He claimed to have witnessed this on his return trip to town, after bringing a nester girl home from a late dance.

Bart recalled that his first reaction to Danvers' recital had been one of disbelief and amazement. He knew Jamison as a steady, hard-working man who read the Bible to his family before every meal, and often preached sermons to his assembled neighbors on the Sabbath. It wasn't until after he

had ridden out to the homestead on Goose Creek and located the buried hides at the exact spot where Danvers had said they would be, that he had come to believe Jamison and the others guilty.

AS A RESULT of Danvers' sworn testimony in court, and the damaging fact of the hides being discovered on Jamison's claim, the four nesters had been convicted. Since that time three of the families had given up their homesteads and moved. Only Jamison's family—his wife, daughter, and two half-grown sons—remained on Goose Creek. It had been a victory for Westrum, who wanted to keep the Goose Creek range open for his own grazing purposes.

Bart didn't say anything until the other had finished. Then he asked, "If what you say is true, Danvers perjured himself in court. You have any notion of why he did it?"

Red shrugged his shoulders. "There was some talk of him being badly in need of cash to settle some gambling debts. Right after the trial, I heard that he paid up."

There was a brief silence between the two men. It was Bart who broke it. "You still haven't told me what your reference to Judge Carew back there meant?"

"Carew?" Mabery seemed to hesitate. Then he grinned faintly. "Westrum don't overlook a blame thing! The Judge is on his payroll. Has been for a long time."

Bart found himself gripping the reins tightly. He had to force himself to ease back in the saddle. "You're sure of that? You couldn't be mistaken?"

"Mistaken? Hell, no! Haven't you ever noticed that the Judge goes off on a hunting trip about every three, four weeks, all by himself. That ain't no accident. That's when he meets up with Westrum or one of his riders and the cash changes hands."

The red-head's words had jolted

Bart badly. His features were grave, his eyes troubled, as he rode on. It was a little while before a comforting thought or two could work their way into his brain. After all, the red-headed outlaw might be lying. He might have some reason to hate Ellie's father, just as he hated Westrum and the XT outfit. In fact, everything he had told Bart could be regarded with suspicion. And yet—

The two men were out of the pines now, moving across a flat bench dominated to the west by a huge, barren, irregular-shaped shoulder of rock jutting out from the side of the mountain. It was late in the afternoon and the sultry August heat was fading slightly under the first impact of cooling air from the east, coming against their faces in errant stirrings of breeze.

They had advanced to a point midway of the open glade when the flat report of a rifle broke the silence. Red Mabery slumped forward in the saddle, his hat falling from his head. The man's bay mare, frightened, broke into a sudden gallop.

Bart had flung a hasty glance at the crest of the rock shoulder, and started to pull his gun from its holster. But then, seeing the runaway horse, he let the weapon slide back and spurred the roan in pursuit. Before the bay had taken half a dozen jumps, Mabery's body had toppled from the saddle and was rolling in the grass.

Bart dropped from his horse and knelt beside the motionless form of the red-head. When he turned him over he found that a bullet had pierced his back and taken him through the heart, killing him instantly.

It took Bart twenty minutes to find a way up onto the rocky elevation to the west. By then, of course, there was no sign of the killer. A thick stand of pine and fir hemmed in the ridge where it merged with the slope of the mountain. Evidently, after firing the shot that had killed Red Mabery, the ambusher had quickly lost himself

in the timber. Bart was aware of a deepening sense of frustration as he swung around and started the descent of the ridge....

CHAPTER III

SLENDER REED

IT WAS after nightfall when Bart rode into Elk City, leading the bay mare with Mabery's body lashed across the saddle. Ahead of him, stores and brightly-lit saloons patterned the gloom of the wide main drag with shafts of escaping brightness. Voices and laughter and the tinny clatter of a piano—the after-dusk sounds of a cowtown—came faintly from up the street as he moved past the first scattering of buildings. Nearer at hand, an aroused dog set up a sudden clamour, and as suddenly fell silent under the stern reprimand of a man's voice.

Bart reached the first cross street and turned down into its deeper shadows. He passed a black and deserted wagon yard, and a moment later drew reins beside the hitch-rail of a squat brick building whose front window flung a yellow glow against the obscurity.

Before he could swing down, the door of the jail office gaped wide and a man appeared. "That you, Bart?" came Sim Tate's querulous, high-pitched voice. "I was beginnin' to think—"

The deputy broke off abruptly as his glance fell upon the bay, dimly outlined in the golden wash fanning out from the door behind him. "What the devil! Who's that?"

Bart hesitated for an instant. Then he said, evenly, "It's Red Mabery. He was shot in the back while I was bringing him in."

"Shot in the back! You mean—"

"Someone was waiting for him when we came down the trail off Bearcat. He got Red with a single shot."

The deputy shook his head slowly from side to side. He was a small, thin-chested man, his shoulders warped under the burden of his sixty or more years. He watched Bart dismount, and coming forward, took the reins of the bay mare and tied them to the rail. After that he followed Bart into the building, limping a little on his left foot, the result of outlaw buckshot that he had taken in the knee in an aborted bank hold-up twenty years ago.

"You sure that bullet wasn't meant for you, Bart?" he suggested.

Bart eased his saddle-stiffened frame down into the swivel chair by the desk and wearily pushed his Stetson onto the back of his head. "No. Whoever put this bullet into Red Mabery meant it for Red. That I know."

"What makes you so sure?"

"In the first place, only one shot was fired. If he'd been after me, why should he quit after the first shot? In the second place, everything indicated that the killer was a dead shot. The way it looked to me, he didn't hang around any longer than it took for him to pull the trigger. It takes a man with a lot of trust in his own marksmanship to do that. And, finally, I think I know why the killer wanted Red out of the way."

Sim had opened a desk drawer and was in the act of placing a pair of battered-looking coffee cups amidst the papers on top of the desk. Now he halted and gave the younger man a startled look.

"If you know that," he said musingly, "maybe you know who the killer is?"

"I'll say this much: there's only one man, so far as I can make out, who stands to gain by Mabery's death—and that's Mort Westrum."

For a moment or two, Sim Tate did not move. He stared at Bart in silent dismay. "Westrum! You realize what you're sayin'?"

"Oh, I don't mean that Westrum fired the fatal bullet himself, I mean

he gave the order that set the whole thing in motion."

In the next few minutes, Bart recounted briefly for the deputy's benefit what had happened in Graveyard Canyon and later along the trail down Bearcat. But in doing so, he made no mention of Judge Carew or what the outlaw had said about him.

The uneasiness in Sim Tate's pale blue eyes had been replaced by downright apprehension by the time Bart finished talking. "I don't like any of this, Bart," he commented. "You're headin' for a heap of trouble if you tangle with Westrum and XT. They're the big noise in this county and they have been for a good many years. And if you try to pull Westrum down, you'll find yourself buckin' his employers back East. They're rich and powerful and they swing a lot of weight at the state capitol."

Bart shrugged. "I'm the sheriff of this county. Seems to me I got my duty to do, regardless of who it hurts."

The deputy looked worried. After a moment he asked, absently. "You want some coffee?"

LATER, walking up Main in the direction of the Widow Langtry's, Bart tried to understand the impulse that had kept him silent about Judge Carew. Was it because the Judge was Ellie's father? Or was it because a doubt still lingered in his mind that Mabery had been telling the truth? And yet Red had seemed reluctant to involve the jurist, had done so only at the lawman's insistence. And if the dead rustler had lied about Judge Carew, why was Bart so sure that what he had said about Westrum was the truth? These thoughts whirled through his brain and left him confused and uncertain.

Arrived at the rooming house, Bart started to shove open the gate of the picket fence enclosing the front yard, then stopped. For a moment he stood undecided. Then he allowed the gate to swing shut and continued on up the street.

Another five minutes brought him to Judge Carew's place at the edge of town. It was a frame two-story structure, larger and far more imposing than any of its neighbors, set well back from the street. A newly-risen moon was shedding a thin, silvery pallor over the street, giving a measure of sharpness to the outline of team and buggy standing before the house. He recognized the fancy, new rig as the property of Duane Northrup.

As he turned up toward the house, Bart caught the easy, self-assured murmur of Northrup's voice coming from the denser shadows of the veranda. A moment later Ellen Carew's warm laughter spilling gayly across the evening's quiet.

But then, suddenly, the laugh broke off and the girl said quickly, "Someone's coming, Duane."

The banker's nephew gave an annoyed grunt. "For Heaven's sake, what now? Can't I ever get a moment alone with you?"

Bart climbed the porch steps. "Ellie," he called quietly, "I've got to speak with your father. Is the Judge in?"

"Oh, it's you, Bart." The girl's voice brimmed with warmth and genuine pleasure as she arose and stepped toward him. "You'll find Dad in the library." Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "There's nothing wrong, is there?"

Bart forgot everything else for a moment except the girl's nearness. The faintest breath of delicate sachet drifted up to his nostrils. He was acutely aware of the slender loveliness of her body, sheathed in a dress of some pale, wispy material that emphasized the smallness of her waist and yet was patterned to the surge of a youthful, sweetly-rounded bosom.

Bart had to fight down a sudden urge to reach out for the girl and plant a kiss upon the dark rosebud of her mouth. At the far end of the porch, Northrup cleared his throat impatiently. The bitter thought settled

upon Bart that if anyone kissed the girl this evening it was likely to be the banker's nephew.

He said, "Nothing wrong, Ellie. I just want to talk to the Judge for a few minutes"

In the library, Judge Carew, erect, silvery-haired, betrayed no surprise at this late evening visit from the sheriff. Instead, he waved Bart to a chair in his most cordial manner. A twinkle of sly humour came into his gray eyes as he inquired, "You sure it's me you want to see, Bart? Not Ellen?"

"No, Judge. I came here tonight to ask your advice. It concerns Jamison and those other Goose Creek homesteaders."

It might have been a trick of the lamplight, but it seemed to Bart that a shadow had touched the older man's handsome features for an instant. "Go on," said Judge Carew quietly. "What about them?"

"I don't think they're guilty."

FOR A LONG moment, the only sound in the room was the steady, relentless ticking of a clock on the mantel, directly below the large and compellingly life-like portrait of Ellen's mother hanging on the wall.

Finally there was a slight creaking sound as Judge Carew shifted his weight in the leather armchair. "Why do you say that? Have you uncovered some new evidence?"

The lawman nodded. "I arrested a rustler up in Graveyard Canyon this morning. A gent named Red Mabery. He admitted he was one of the men who had driven the XT beef onto Jamison's place. He said the cows were butchered and their hides buried without Jamison or the other nesters knowing about it."

"Preposterous! Why should anybody in their right mind—"

Bart interrupted. "You remember how each of the nesters insisted at the trial that the hides had been deliberately planted by someone who wanted them off the Goose Creek range?"

"I remember. The implication being that this was some deep dark plot on the part of Westrum and XT. I considered the matter an obvious attempt to confuse the issue and play on local prejudices, and I so instructed the jury to regard it. I would do so again, under the circumstances."

"Yes, but what if the XT outfit was actually guilty as claimed?"

Judge Carew looked grim, harassed. "You have proof that XT resorted to such criminal acts? Proof that would stand up in a courtroom?" His voice was sharp, lacking in sympathy.

"I don't know," Bart replied. "That's why I came. To ask your opinion. I do have the statement of Red Mabery that he took part in XT's scheme to get Jamison sent to prison. That it was done at Westrum's express orders."

The white-haired, handsome jurist was frowning now, his eyes narrowed in thought. "This man you arrested—this Red Mabery. Isn't that the same man who was fired by the XT ranch last spring?"

Bart nodded. "The same."

The judge cleared his throat. "From what I've heard, there was no love lost between him and his old outfit, and I understand he was especially bitter against Westrum. Don't you think that makes anything he might say suspect? And another thing. You say he is guilty of rustling. That makes his testimony even more dubious. No, Sheriff, I'm afraid you are placing your trust in a slender reed."

"Maybe I am," said Bart. "But you haven't heard the whole story. While I was bringing Mabery back to Elk City, he was ambushed and shot down."

"What!" Judge Carew looked up quickly. "You mean Mabery is dead?"

"He is. And Westrum and a party of XT men we met up with knew Red and me would be riding the trail back to town."

There was a hint of shock in Judge

Carew's eyes. His frown deepened and he seemed to be considering his words carefully before speaking. "Meaning that you think Westrum or one of his riders killed Mabery?"

"It seems logical—" Bart began, when he was interrupted by the Judge's sharp questions.

"Did you actually see the man who fired the shot? Did you actually recognize him as an XT employee?"

The lawman admitted reluctantly, "No, I didn't, Judge. I never saw the killer at all."

Judge Carew stared thoughtfully across the room. "And that's your case against Westrum, Bart? Just what you've told me?" A moment later, he shook his head. "I'm afraid it won't hold up. Actually, you haven't got a case at all. Just supposition and theory."

He went on to explain. "In the first place, you didn't see the man who did the ambushing. For all either of us know, Mabery may have had dozens of enemies eager for a chance to put an end to his sojourn on earth. Then, secondly, there's this matter of the XT's efforts to have Jamison and the other nesters jailed. Again there is no proof of this except the questionable accusations of a discharged employee, a man under arrest for cattle-stealing. And now, with Mabery dead, you don't even have that. Except as hearsay evidence—not admissible in court! And, finally, what about the testimony given by the hotel clerk, Danvers? Testimony that he had witnessed the butchering of XT cattle by Jamison and the other defendants? How do you propose to get around that?"

Bart sat quietly for a while, staring down at the richly patterned rug. He realized that the Judge was right. There was no tangible evidence to back up Red Mabery's story, nothing that would stand up in court. And he had discovered nothing here to help him make up his mind either way.

"Thanks, Judge," he said, rising from his chair. "I won't take up any

more of your time."

CHAPTER IV

A FEW QUESTIONS

BART AND his deputy rode out to the scene of the bushwhacking next morning. They searched the crest of the rocky ridge and sought the killer's tracks in the timber beyond. When they did stumble across the imprint of hooves, the trail climbed directly through the thick belt of forest and vanished on the boulder- and shale-scarred slopes above. Convinced at last of the futility of their efforts, they turned their horses back in the direction of town.

The two men returned to Elk City along about mid-afternoon. When they came to the cross street where the jail was located, Bart, instead of turning up toward the squatty brick building, hawled his horse to a halt. Tate reined in also, a mild look of surprise in his pale blue eyes.

"What is it, Bart?"

"I just remembered something," Bart told him. "If there was any truth in Red's story, Danvers was lying when he testified in court he saw XT beef being butchered. Reckon I'll have a little talk with him."

Tate shook his head. "I think it's just a fool waste of time," he argued. "Even if he was lyin' about that night, you don't think he'd come out and admit it, do you?"

"No. But Danvers is a kind of nervous gent. There's a chance that if the matter was brought up suddenly, his manner and actions might betray him."

Sim Tate sighed and shrugged his spidery shoulders in an indication of resignation. "Okay, Sheriff. It's no bluestem out of my pasture. Go ahead and talk with him. But I still think it won't do you no good."

Bart swung down, handed his reins to the deputy and set out up the

street. He kept to the west walk, protected from the sun's heat by the bluish shadows of the angular, false-fronted buildings.

He passed the bank, nodding to Duane Northrup who happened to be standing by the window gazing out into the street. The dark-eyed, clean-shaven young man gave no sign of having noticed him, and Bart walked on quickly.

A few moments later, he was stepping into the lobby of the Stockmen's Hotel, cool and pleasant after the heat of the afternoon. The owner of the hotel, Fred Jackson, sat behind the desk, reading a three-week-old copy of a Kansas City newspaper.

"Danvers? You say you're lookin' for Danvers?" he burst forth a moment later. "Now there's a queer thing. Danvers never showed up for work this mornin'. I pounded on his door, figgerin' he'd overslept again. But when I got the key and went in his room a little later I found out his bed hadn't even been slept in!"

Bart stared. "Then you haven't any idea where he is?"

"Well—" The hotelman hesitated briefly. "I do know one thing. He's left town."

"How'd you know that?"

"Talked with Joel Biggs over at the livery. He said Danvers woke him up around one o'clock last night, got a horse and rode off. He seemed to be in considerable of a hurry."

BART THOUGHT this over for a while, a frown shaping itself on his face. Finally he said, "Danvers spent considerable of his time over at the Dutchman's, didn't he?"

"You bet." Jackson nodded vigorously. "Not only his time but his money. He was a gamblin' fool. That's one of the things that puzzles me. Yesterday afternoon he claimed he was broke and tried to get an advance on his salary. I didn't give it to him because he owed me too much already. Yet he seems to have gotten hold of

some cash somewhere, or how would he have had the money to get out of town?"

Bart thanked the hotelman, stepped back into the street, and made his way to the livery barn.

Biggs eyed the sheriff interestedly when he learned that the lawman was seeking information about Danvers. "You know, sheriff," he confided, "I never did trust that sharp-faced hombre. What's he been up to?"

"Your jumping to conclusions, Biggs. I didn't say he'd been up to anything, did I?"

Biggs smiled knowingly. "I ain't exactly a fool, Sheriff," he chuckled. "Last night Danvers comes hot-footing it over here to get hisself a horse to get out of town. Now you come around trying to find out where he's gone. That adds up."

"Sometimes it's easy to add things up wrong," Bart warned. "But I got no time to argue. About that horse Danvers got here—he bought it outright?"

Biggs snorted. "He did! You think I'd be foolish enough to rent him a horse when every sign pointed to him skedaddling out of here for good? My ma didn't raise herself no idiot like that!"

Bart was silent a minute. "Did he do any haggling about the price you set on the horse?"

"No. Matter of fact I'd been trying to sell him one of my saddlers for some time. Understand this, Sheriff. It wasn't the best horse in the world. A kind of mean critter in some ways—not suited for a livery horse. But for a man who knew the first thing about handling horses, he was a bargain at the price. Danvers wanted him, had even made a couple of offers. But I figgered they were too low."

"However last night he didn't object to paying the full price?" Bart inquired.

"I reckon he was in too much of a hurry to argue. He just pulled out a roll of bills, peeled off a couple,

threw them at me and hustled off to the rear of the barn to saddle up. I'd offered to toss in a saddle to boot."

"You say he appeared to have plenty of money?"

"Yep. He had a pretty fair-sized roll in his fist. Seemed like there was at least a couple of hundred dollars there."

The lawman's next stop was at the Dutchman's Saloon. The bartender, Tim Moylan, dark-browed, ruddy-faced, was talking casually with a pair of customers at one end of the long bar. When he saw Bart come through the batwings, he excused himself and moved up the room. His good-natured Irish face was twisted into a friendly grin.

"Afternoon, Bart, me boy. How'd a glass of cold beer look to ye on a day like this?"

"Mighty good, Tim."

A MINUTE later, the lawman put down the empty glass, wiped the mustache of foam from his upper lip and gave a sigh of pleasure. "Sure hit the spot," he announced.

Moylan studied him shrewdly. "What's on your mind, Sheriff?"

"I was just hoping you might be able to give me a little information, Tim. You were here in the saloon last night?"

Moylan nodded. "That I was. From three in the afternoon clean through 'til the closin'. What was it ye wanted to know?"

"Did you happen to see Danvers here last night?"

"That I did. 'Tis a rare evenin' he don't turn up sooner or later."

"Was he patronizing the gambling tables?"

The bartender squinted his eyes and frowned across the room. "Now that I couldn't be certain of. I remember he was hangin' round the tables, but I don't remember that he did any wagerin'—” He suddenly slapped one large hand noisily down on the bar. "By the saints!—that's right! I re-

member now! He was tryin' to borrow some money to play. Even tried to talk me into makin' him a loan. That's why he had to be content to look on. He didn't have a cent in his pockets."

"Did he stay here all evening?"

"Most of it. I remember that about an hour afore closin' time, young Northrup comes stampin' in here lookin' fer him. They talked fer a minute an' then both of 'em headed fer the street like the Divil hisself was after thim. An' that's the last I seen of Danvers that evenin'."

Bart was regarding the Irishman with startled eyes: "Northrup! You sure about that?"

"May the Divil take me if it wasn't so! Ain't often you see Northrup or his nephew in a saloon. That's why I took special note of it last night!"

Shortly Bart headed for the batwings. Outside, he paused on the walk, considering this unexpected bit of information that had fallen to him. Then, his face soberly thoughtful, he started back up the street toward the bank.

Duane Northrup was in the act of closing the bank's doors for the day when Bart got there. He had started to lower the green shades when Bart stepped up and rattled the doors to attract his attention.

Northrup peered through the glass upper part of the doors, and a gleam of annoyance flared in his eyes as he recognized the lawman. He turned the lock in the door and swung it open a few inches. "Bank's closed," he announced curtly. "Come back tomorrow."

"This won't wait," said Bart. He shoved his shoulder against the door, pried it open, and stepped inside.

"Well, what is it?" Northrup eyed the intruder with no attempt to conceal his deep dislike. "I told you banking hours are over. I don't understand—"

"This visit has nothing to do with the bank or its business," Bart in-

formed him. He glanced around. "We alone here?"

The other nodded sullenly. "My uncle wasn't feeling well, so he went home early."

"Good!" said Bart. "Then we can have a nice, quiet little talk. Just the two of us."

"See here, Corey! What's this all about? Does this have anything to do with my attentions to Ellen Carew? Maybe you think that just because you happen to be sheriff—"

"This has nothing to do with Ellie," Bart interrupted with a touch of warmth in his voice. "I'm here on official business. I'd be obliged if you answered a few questions for me."

DUANE NORTHRUP eyed the lawman suspiciously. "Questions? What about?"

"I understand you dropped in at the Dutchman's last night after you came from the Judge's house?"

Northrup bristled. "Any good reason why I shouldn't step into a saloon for a drink if I want it?"

"No reason at all," agreed Bart. "But you didn't even go near the bar. I have the bartender's word for that. Instead, you hunted up the clerk at the Stockmen's Hotel and talked with him. Then both of you left the saloon in a hurry. Ain't that right?"

"Maybe it is," admitted Northrup cautiously. "But I still can't figure out why you should be so interested in what I did last night."

"What I'm interested in is what you told Danvers. Why'd he follow you outside in such a hurry?"

The banker's nephew was silent for a brief moment. Then a little flicker of derision came into his eyes. "I don't know what you're trying to prove by this line of questioning, Corey. But I'm afraid you're in for a big disappointment. All I told Danvers was that Judge Carew wanted to see him at his place right away. Does that satisfy you?"

Bart drew in a heavy breath. He

stood face to face with the despairing certainty that Red Mabery had told the truth. Westrum and XT had conspired to put innocent men behind bars. And Judge Carew had been party to the whole sickening deal. That was the only possible explanation why the Judge had sent for Danvers, warned him to leave town, and evidently supplied him with the money he needed to do so.

Wearily, the lawman nodded his head. "Thanks, Northrup. That's all I wanted to know."

Back at the jail, Sim Tate stared at him curiously. "What you lookin' so down in the mouth for, son? I told you you'd never get anything out of that sharp-faced hotel clerk."

"I didn't see Danvers. He's disappeared."

"Disappeared!" The deputy's pale blue eyes had opened wide. He seemed to mull this over for a while. Then he frowned. "It almost looks like he got wind of what was goin' on and high-tailed out of here on account he was afraid that story he told in court wouldn't stand up."

Bart nodded. "That's the way it looks."

Presently Tate asked, "What now, Bart? You still figger to try and prove Jamison and the others were railroaded?"

Bart didn't speak for several moments. He thought of Ellie Carew and his resolution weakened. But then his mouth tightened, and he said, grimly, "I aim to try. Somehow I don't expect to rest easy in my bed nights knowing that I helped to send innocent men to jail."

CHAPTER V

"I WON'T FORGET THIS, TIN-STAR!"

AFTER SUPPER a few nights later, Bart followed the Widow Langtry into her large, spotless

kitchen. She listened to what he had to say with an expression of deepening bewilderment on her plump, good-humoured features.

"Of course, it would be nice to have some help around the place," she agreed. "Lord knows I could stand to have someone! It keeps me going from morning to night—making beds, cleaning the rooms, washing clothes, and with three big meals to prepare each day!" She paused, heaving a reluctant sigh. "But I just couldn't afford to hire anybody, Bart. As it is, with three young 'uns to keep fed and dressed properly and supplied with school books, I'm just barely getting along. You know that."

Bart assured her hastily, "I didn't mean for you to pay for this out of your own pocket, Mrs. Langtry. That's my end of the bargain. All I wanted was to be sure there was work there wouldn't seem anything queer in your hiring her."

The landlady eyed Bart with a whetted curiosity, "What are you up to, Bart? Who is this girl you want me to hire?"

"It's the Jamison girl. Her family is having a hard time of it out on Goose creek and I thought—"

"Amy Jamison! Well, I do declare! She is a pretty young thing." Then she smiled at Bart with a touch of roguishness in her eyes. "Bart, you are a deep one! Honestly, you had me fooled! I thought all along it was Judge Carew's daughter you—"

Bart felt his cheeks go hot. "This ain't what it might look like, Mrs. Langtry. I have no interest in the girl whatsoever. In fact, I hardly know her."

Despite Bart's protestations, the landlady looked unconvinced. Yet, when he left her a little later, she had agreed to his proposition, and he had her promise not to reveal to anyone the fact that he would be supplying the money for the girl's employment. She would send word by

one of the men riding out Goose Creek way that a job was waiting for the girl if she cared to take it.

Before the week was out, Amy Jamison had ridden into town, seated up front of a rumbling wagon driven by her brother, Lon. Standing in the shade of the livery bar entrance, Bart looked on as the wagon moved up the street in a smother of dust and drew up in front of the boarding house. The girl jumped down quickly, accepted a neat, paper-wrapped bundle from her brother, made a little gesture of farewell with her fingers, and turned toward the house.

LON, A square-faced, stubborn-jawed seventeen-year-old, swung the team around and came back up the street. He hawled up in front of Sam Leslie's mercantile, got down and went inside.

He was standing beside the counter giving his order when Bart followed him through the door. The youth swung around, caught sight of the lawman, and a stony, tight-lipped expression came into his face. He turned back to the storekeeper and resumed his ordering of items from the shelves.

Bart waited for him to finish, then asked, "How are things up on Goose Creek, Lon?"

The boy turned quickly, and for a moment he just stared at Bart. At last he said, sullenly, "I reckon we're makin' out okay, Sheriff."

Bart licked dry lips. "Look, Lon," he said suddenly, "I'd like to help you and your Ma if I could. I know how hard things must be since your Pa—well, with him away. I figured that if you needed some tools to help with the harvest or a loan to buy some—"

"No, thanks!" Lon Jamison's eyes held a smouldering fire. "You've helped us out aplenty, Sheriff. We ain't hankerin' for any more!" He turned, directed the storekeeper to put his order aside until he returned, then stalked out without another look in

the lawman's direction.

Sam Leslie stared after him angrily. "Why, that no-good nester whelp!" he exclaimed indignantly. "That's the thanks you get for tryin' to give him a helpin' hand! Somebody ought to turn him over their knee and give him the tannin' he deserves!"

Bart shook his head. "I don't know as I blame him. If you were in his boots, Sam, I reckon you'd feel the same way. After all, I'm the man who sent his Pappy to prison."

Returning to the walk, Bart was in time to see young Jamison disappear through the door of the eating place a short distance up the street. At the same moment, he caught a glimpse of three horsemen moving into town from the north. They swung down in front of a saloon and as they headed for the swinging doors, Bart recognized them as XT riders. He saw that one was the tall, thin, hard-featured man, Larkins.

For a moment, Bart paused, sensing possible trouble. But next instant he dismissed the idea. Lon Jamison had probably stopped at the restaurant for coffee and pie. That wouldn't take long. Soon he'd return to Sam's store, get his supplies and be heading back to Goose Creek. On the other hand, it might be an hour before the XT riders emerged from the saloon.

Bart looked at his watch. It was close to noon, so he made his way across the street to the boarding house. Amy Jamison, her cheeks flushed by the warmth of the kitchen, was busily setting the table when Bart entered. She gave him a quick glance and smiled at him timidly. She gave no sign that she shared her brother's sullen resentment.

"Hello, Amy," he said innocently. "You working here now?"

The girl nodded. "Mrs. Langtry needed someone, and I was glad to get the job." The color in her cheeks deepened a little and she hurried off towards the kitchen.

The meal over, most of the other boarders hurriedly arose and departed. The lawman pushed back his chair and sat there for a while, pulling tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket to make a cigarette. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Amy Jamison as she started to clear the table of dirty dishes. He was forced to admire the speed and deftness with which she worked. From what he had observed, the Jamisons were all hard-workers, and this girl was no exception. She was pretty, too, he couldn't help noticing.

SUDDENLY the girl paused in her work. Bart saw her body stiffen. She was staring through one of the curtained front windows into the street. Something in the expression of her face made Bart jump up and look to see what had attracted her attention.

"Sheriff—" the girl squeezed the words between paling lips—"aren't those men XT riders? It looks like..."

Bart gave a startled exclamation. Next moment he was out of the house, hastening with lengthy strides toward the front gate. Even before he reached it, he called out in a loud voice to the four men standing in the street, "What's coming off here?"

Larkin and his two companions glanced around, surprise on their faces. Lon Jamison, too, shuttled his gaze in the lawman's direction. But his features held anger more than anything else. The sound of their voices, raised in violent dispute, had died away.

The youth and the three XT riders stood without moving as Bart stepped through the gate and moved toward them. The skinny man, Larkin, was the first to speak. "I don't know what you're all het up about, Sheriff. Me and the boys are just havin' a friendly little talk with the kid here."

"It didn't sound friendly to me."

"That's where you're wrong, Sheriff." Larkin grinned a little and

changed amused glances with his two partners. "All I did was ask the nester kid how his Pa liked it up at the State Pen. Ain't that right, boys?"

"Seems you could put your time in town to some better use," Bart commented drily. "Anyhow I think it would be a good idea if you rode out of here right now."

Anger flickered in Larkin's eyes. "Look, Sheriff, you ain't got no right to order us out of town! We got some business to tend to. Besides—"

Bart held up his hands. "All right, Larkin. I'll give you an hour to finish up what you came to do. But remember, I'll have my eye on the three of you! If there's any trouble..."

Larkin scowled at Bart, rage glinting in his eyes. For a moment he seemed to hesitate. Then his skinny shoulders relaxed and a moment later he moved off down the street, followed by his two companions.

They were hardly out of earshot, when Lon Jamison growled furiously, "Why'd you have to interfere?" Bart was startled by the intensity of feeling in the youth's voice. His jaw was thrust out stubbornly, and his mouth was compressed into a tight line across his sun-browned features. "Maybe you figgered I couldn't take care of myself. Is that it, tin-star?"

Bart said quietly, "Three against one is too long odds for anyone, Lon. Why don't you get your stuff at Leslie's and hit for home?"

The youth shook his head violently, "I ain't runnin' away from 'em or anyone else! If they want trouble, I aim to oblige 'em!" He pushed back his patched coat, now a size too small for him, and patted something tucked into the waistband of his levis. Bart glimpsed a battered Colt six-shooter, wooden handle dark with age.

"Sorry, Lon. If you intend to stay in town, I'll have to ask for that gun. It'll be returned when you start back for Goose Creek."

Lon stared. "What is this? You have

one law for nesters and another for cowmen? I didn't notice you askin' those XT men to surrender their guns!"

"That was an oversight, Lon. But the same rules apply to every man. I intend to get their guns as soon as you hand over yours."

Lon seemed to waver a moment. Then he snorted, "Try and get it!"

He had started to turn away when Bart's fist caught him on the side of the jaw and sprawled him in the dust. Before he knew what had happened, the lawman had leaned down and possessed himself of the gun.

The youth fingered the side of his face, shook his head once, then slowly climbed to his feet. He kept staring at Bart, an icy rage in his eyes. Finally he blurted, "I won't forget this, tin-star!" Then he stumbled away toward the wagon standing before the mercantile.

CHAPTER VI

THE KILLER

BART SWORE softly to himself. The last thing he had wanted to do was inflict further humiliation on this seventeen-year-old. Pride in his own manhood was about the only thing left for Lon Jamison to cling to, and now Bart had given that pride a severe jolt. Yet he did not see how he could have acted differently.

After a moment Bart gave a disgusted shrug of the shoulders and went in search of the three XT men. He found them as they were emerging from the gunsmith's shop. The men looked surprised at his request, but Larkin, with surprising mildness, instead of offering arguments, said quickly, "No need for that, Sheriff. We're just about ready to start back to XT."

Bart noticed that the skinny cowhand, as he spoke, was staring past

him at something up the street. After the three men had walked away, heading for their horses tied in front of the saloon, Bart swung around. He saw a fog of rising dust as Lon Jamison sent his team wheeling south out of town. Bart's hand went to the ancient Colt he had shoved into his belt. Evidently Lon had been too angry to seek out the lawman and request the return of his gun.

Bart spun on his heel and went back to the jail. Tate wasn't in the office, and Bart slumped into a chair, a bleak expression in his eyes. A sense of futility gripped him. He had wanted to befriend the Jamisons and had succeeded only in arousing deeper enmity in young Lon.

Twenty minutes later, Sim Tate rode up. He tied his horse and stepped through the door, placing a wicker basket gently on the desk.

"Fresh eggs," he explained. "Molly Turner promised me some if I'd stop by her place. You know, I think that little lady's got her eye on me for a husband."

Bart, remembering that the Turner place was a quarter mile south of town, asked idly, "I suppose you met Lon Jamison heading back home?"

"Yep. Sure seemed in a powerful rush, too. Like a herd of stampedin' buffalo was on his heels. Didn't even turn his head when he went by. I ain't even sure he seen me. You know what was rowelin' him?"

All Bart would say was, "He had a little trouble in town."

The spidery little deputy scratched his ear. A puzzled frown creased his brow. "I wonder—well, I reckon it didn't mean anything."

Bart shot a quick glance at the older man. "What's on your mind, Sim?"

"Oh, nothing. Just something I noticed a little after I met up with young Jamison. There was a rider headin' south just a little west of town, like he was skirtin' it. And he seemed to be in a devil of a hurry too.

Not that it's of any importance, but—"

Bart was sitting up straight in his chair now, a startled look on his face. "Did you recognize this rider? Could it have been that XT hand, Larkin?"

Tate looked dubious. "It could have been, Bart, but I ain't sure it was. He was too far away. Last I seen of him he ducked into those hills southwest of town and plumb disappeared from sight."

Bart exclaimed suddenly, "Sim, you're looking at one blamed big fool!" He came to his feet and started toward the door. Then, remembering that he had removed his gun belt upon entering the office, he turned back to snatch it from the top of the desk.

WHILE he hastily belted the gun about his waist, he told the deputy, "I haven't time to saddle the roan, so I'll take your horse, Sim."

Sim Tate's eyes were puzzled. "What is this, Bart? You gone loco? What—?"

But Bart was in too much of a hurry to answer the other's questions. He went through the door at a half-run, quickly untied the horse at the rail and vaulted into the saddle. Spurring away from the jail, he had a confused last impression of Sim Tate standing in the doorway gawking at him.

He sent the bay pounding out of town at a hard gallop. Far ahead of him along the yellow ribbon of road, a wipsy banner of dust marked Lon Jamison's progress toward Goose Creek.

As he kept his horse to a steady, ground-covering run, he was reviewing in his mind the country that lay ahead. Lon Jamison, he knew, would follow the main road five miles south, then turn off onto the wagon trail that led westward toward Goose Creek, entering the hills about two miles further on.

This chain of hills reared from the flatness of the prairie about half a

mile south of town, angling off in a southwesterly direction. Roughly, Bart envisioned a huge, flattened triangle, with the two roads forming the shorter sides and the string of ridges the long side.

Half a mile south of town, he abandoned the road, making for the rough horse trail that skirted west of the line of hills. The same trail, Bart judged, taken earlier by the rider Sim Tate had glimpsed. By following it, Bart hoped to reach the spot where the wagon road entered the hills before the slower-moving wagon could get there.

The lawman pushed the bay hard. Even when he saw the animal was tiring badly, he dared not pull up to rest him. But finally, with the beast lunging forward on heart alone and staggering with weariness, Bart caught sight of the wheel ruts of the Goose Creek trail winding down the side of the long boulder-scarred hill to his left. At the same moment, he saw the horse standing ground-hitched at its base, on the near side of the road.

He halted for a moment, then rode on cautiously for a short distance. After that he dismounted and moved forward on foot. There was a sense of urgency in him, but he did not give way to it. Slowly, quietly, he moved past the horse, began working his way up the rocky slope. Here huge boulders and patches of loose shale made the climbing difficult.

Five minutes later, gaining the crest of the hill, he glanced down and discovered a man crouched behind a pair of fair-size boulders halfway down the east slope. The lawman was aware of a wild pounding at his temples, and a fierce rage arose in him as he recognized Larkin's tall, skinny form.

THE XT rider held a Winchester in his hands and he was peering carefully down the wagon trail to the east. Even as Bart watched him, he pulled the black Stetson from

his head, mopped perspiration from his forehead and brows, eased the barrel of the rifle forward between the rocks. Bart lifted his glance and saw the wagon with Lon Jamison high on the seat moving toward them at a rapid clip. Another minute or two and the youth would be within rifle range.

Bart went down the hill in a scrambling rush, stones and bits of rubble peppering down ahead of him. He saw Larkin's head twist around on his scrawny neck, his eyes roll upward in alarm. A curse broke from the man's lips. He pushed to his knees and tried to get the rifle around in time. When he saw he wasn't going to make it, he dropped the weapon and made a grab for the six-gun at his side.

Bart struck him with the full impact of his downhill leap, tumbling him on his back, spinning the gun from his grasp. Larkin rolled over spryly and came to his feet like a big cat. He looked around hurriedly for the gun, failed to find it, then came at Bart, his lips lifting from his teeth wolfishly.

The lawman ducked under his wild-swinging right hand, and slammed home a smashing blow to the ribs that half-doubled up the other man. Larkin remained bent over for a moment, a grimace of pain on his bony features. Bart measured him quickly, stepped in, and threw his right fist into the man's face. Larkin was catapulted backward down the boulder-strewn incline. He landed on his shoulders, rolled over once, and slid half a dozen yards further down the hill in a small avalanche of showering stones and choking dust.

Bart, grim-faced and tight-lipped, marched down to where he lay. He grabbed the skinny XT rider by the front of his shirt, dragged him to his feet and again slammed his fist against the man's jaw. Larkin went down and lay there, his breath bubbling in his throat.

The man made no move to get up.

But Bart saw that he was squinting up through the tangled fringe of dark brown hair that had tumbled forward across his face. There was stark fear looking out of his eyes.

Bart said, "You're the one who killed Red Mabery, ain't you?"

Larkin stirred, gave a little groan, and finally sat up. "I—I don't know what you're talkin' about," he mumbled.

Bart stared down at him, his fists tight-clenched. "Get up!" he said sharply.

Larkin peered up at him, surprised. Then he shook his head. "I had enough."

Bart experienced a wild desire to smash this bushwhacker to a bloody pulp. He wanted to pull him to his feet and keep hitting him. But he restrained himself, remembering that his job was to bring in lawbreakers. He heaved a little sigh and stepped back. Slipping his gun from the holster, he motioned with it. "Come on. We're heading back to town."

WHEN BART returned to the jail after lunch next day, he learned from Sim Tate that Judge Carew had expressed a desire to see him. "Said he'd be waitin' for you over at the bar in the Stockmen's Hotel."

Judge Carew was seated in a remote corner of the nearly-deserted bar as Bart stepped through the door a few minutes later. The lawman noted with surprise that a bottle of whiskey and two glasses stood on the table before the jurist. Bart had never thought of the Judge as a drinking man.

"Glad to see you, boy," the handsome, silvery-thatched man called out. He poured the glasses brim-full. "Here. Have a drink."

Bart emptied his glass, placed it carefully back on the table. "Well, judge...?"

"I wanted to talk with you, Bart. About this XT man you got down there in jail."

"Larkin, you mean. What about him?"

"Just what you expect to gain by this, Bart? Except to stir up a heap of bad feeling between you and the XT outfit?"

Bart gave the other man a calculating look. "You talk like you think I should turn this man free? Do you?"

"It might save a lot of unnecessary trouble if you did, Bart."

"I don't think I understand you, Judge. Here's a man guilty of trying to dry-gulch a kid seventeen years old. A man I've got a pretty definite suspicion is the one who shot Red Mabery in the back. And you want me to turn him loose?"

Judge Carew waved his hand impatiently. "That may be true. Every word you say might be true. I don't know. But I'm thinking of what will happen when this man is brought up in court. Do you think there'll be any chance of convicting him?"

"Of Mabery's murder, no. But it shouldn't be too hard to convince a jury that he was about to dry-gulch young Jamison when he was taken. The testimony I can give in this case won't be hearsay. It'll be something I saw with my own eyes. And, if anything more is needed, Lon Jamison can testify to part of what happened. He drove up just as I took Larkin into custody."

"Maybe that would be enough if Larkin wasn't an XT man. Bart, can't you see this is no ordinary case. XT is no ordinary outfit. Westrum has money and political influence to back him up. No matter how strong a case you make out against Larkin, the jury is likely to turn a deaf ear. And it'll be Westrum's money that'll make them hard of hearing. You *have* heard of bought juries, Bart?"

"I have." Bart looked across the table at the older man, a sober anger in his eyes. "And I've heard of bought judges, too."

Judge Carew gave a little start. He dropped his eyes and busied himself with pouring whiskey into his empty glass. He lifted it and downed it.

a swift gulp. But Bart noticed that his hand was shaking slightly. Finally, he looked up.

"Meaning exactly what, Bart?" he asked.

Bart sat in tight-lipped silence for a moment. Then he said grimly. "I think you know what I mean, Judge."

Carew started to speak, but instantly changed his mind. He sat staring across the table at Bart with all the friendliness gone out of his eyes.

CHAPTER VII

JUST A PARTY OF GENTS

AFTER HIS talk with the judge, Bart felt too restless to return to the jail office. He went around to the stable in the rear, saddled his roan and rode out of town. It was late in the afternoon before he returned, riding slowly past the Carew house. Ellie was out in the front yard, tending to the flowers in her garden. When she saw him, she came over to the fence and called out, "Afternoon, Bart. You too busy to come in for a glass of cool lemonade?"

The lawman halted. "Thanks, Ellie. Some other time."

The girl smiled at him, but there was a touch of disappointment in her eyes. "Seems like I don't get to see much of you lately, Bart," she said. "You haven't asked me to a dance for ever so long now."

Bart gave her a startled look. "Last three times I did ask you had already promised Duane Northrup to go with him."

"I know," said the girl. "But that was because he was new here in town and claimed not to know any other girls. Besides, Dad seemed to think I ought to make friends with Duane. You know what old cronies Banker Northrup and Dad have always been."

Bart was silent for a while. "Seems to me you come mighty close to over-doing that business of being nice to Duane. I don't know how many times

I came around of an evening to find you and him gone for a ride in his buggy." A faint note of jealousy had crept into his voice. "Where'd you go? That place by the bend in Cottonwood Creek we always used to end up?"

Ellie shook her head, eyes flashing indignantly. "Cross my heart, Bart," she cried, "never once did we go near that spot. You should know better than that! That place belongs to us alone—just the two of us!"

She had stepped through the gate and was standing on the plank walk, looking up at Bart with a strange yearning in her eyes. The afternoon sun put touches of raw gold on the deep chestnut of her hair. Suddenly Bart slid from the saddle and caught her in his arms.

He kissed her, and it was a full half minute before she broke away from him. She smoothed her hair back into place with deft fingers and glanced guiltily up and down the street.

"Goodness, Bart," she said breathlessly. "Right out here in the street. What will people think?"

"They'll think I'm crazy about you, Ellie. And it's true. I am."

The girl said, "You know something Bart? I've been dying to ride out to that place on Cottonwood Creek. Just like we used to do. Can't we do it soon?"

"I don't see why not."

"How—how about tonight?" suggested the girl.

"To-night? Sure!" Bart's voice was eager. "I'll rent a buggy at the livery. How about eight? Too early?"

Ellie shook her head, a warm glow in her eyes. "That'll be fine, Bart. Until eight then, darling..."

Bart thought he had never seen Ellie look lovelier than she did that evening when she came down off the porch to greet him. She colored faintly at the awed admiration in his eyes. "Do you like my dress, Bart? This is the first time I've ever worn it. Mrs. Gail says

that all the women back East are dressing this way."

Bart said softly, "I'll bet there isn't one of them that looks half as pretty as you do."

Bart helped the girl into the buggy, took his place beside her, and laid the reins across the rumps of the team. The evening shadows were thickening about them as they left the lights of town behind.

The buggy was about three miles out of town, moving steadily along the road toward Cottonwood Creek, when the four masked riders appeared. In a sudden swift clatter of hooves, they swept out of the dense shadows of a clump of trees beside the road. In the half-murk, drawn guns glittered faintly in their hands.

BART MADE an instinctive move toward his own gun. But next instant, remembering the girl beside him, he froze, hand on gunbutt. Slowly, in response to the curt command, he lifted his hands above his head.

"That's better, Sheriff," came the relieved words of the man who had spoken earlier. "Thought for a moment I'd have to plug you.... Jake, get the Sheriff's hardware."

Not attempting to conceal his anger, Bart demanded, "Who are you? What do you want?"

The other chuckled softly. "Just a party of gents who happen to crave your company, Sheriff. We brought along an extra horse for you. Now, if you'll oblige us by getting down from that buggy and climbing into the saddle, I'll give you my word nothin' will happen to the little lady."

Bart's mouth tightened. But he hesitated only the briefest fraction of a second before jumping down and walking over to the saddled horse that trailed one of the masked riders. He placed his foot in the stirrup and swung up.

"All right, gents," called the man who had done all the talking. "Let's get goin'."

The cavalcade moved off through the dusk, heading eastward toward the dark bulk of Bearcat Mountain. They had proceeded only a short distance when from the road behind them came the sounds of a buggy being hastily wheeled about, horses being whipped to a hard run in the direction of town.

The leader of the masked men brought the party to a halt with a wave of his hand. He hitched around in the saddle slightly and seemed to be listening. The hurried beat of hooves along the road faded away.

"That ought to do it," said the head man. He wheeled his horse and led the group of horsemen back in a northwesterly direction, moving toward the upper valley.

They rode for some time and then one of the men asked, "You think there's any chance of 'em bein' able to track us in this moonlight, Bill?"

"I dunno," said the leader. "Moon does seem kinda bright though. Reckon we better not take any chances. Jake, you and the others head for the upper bend of Cottonwood. That should give 'em an easy trail to follow. The sheriff kin come with me."

When time came for the party to separate, one of the men carefully tied Bart's hands behind him. Then the three men rode off, angling a little to the west. Bill watched them go, then said, "Follow me, Sheriff. This ride may be a little rough, but any friends of yours that try to cut sign on us are goin' to have one hell of a time."

He turned north, heading into rough hilly country, broken by deep draws and ravines. The horses scrambled and slid and fought their way up steep, rock-faced hillsides and down the opposite sides. Once Bart came perilously close to being flung backward out of the saddle. Frequently they were forced to halt to rest the sweat-lathered horses. But at last they came out onto a crude trail. After that, their progress was easier.

Vague suspicions had been stirring within Bart during the ride. He

couldn't free his mind from the disturbing thought that Ellie Carew might have had something to do with what had happened. She had asked him to take her riding in the direction of Cottonwood Creek. Was it entirely accidental that the four men had happened to be waiting there for the buggy's appearance?

ABOUT TWO hours later, the two men came down off a high rock-rim and followed a dry river bed down into what appeared in the soft moonlight to be a pleasant, grass-carpeted valley. In a matter of minutes, they were halting outside of a cabin, lamplight from its windows glowing warmly against the darkness. The masked man got down and came over to Bart's horse to help him dismount. Then he drew his gun and prodded him toward the cabin.

In the meantime, the cabin door had opened. A man stood against the bright interior peering out at them. He glanced back over his shoulder and spoke to somebody, then stepped back to allow Bart and his captor to enter.

Bart's gaze settled quickly upon the squat, thick-bodied man seated at one end of a rough, pine-board table. He was idly shuffling a pack of worn cards, and a thin coil of blue smoke was still rising from the cracked saucer where he had snuffed out the stub of his cigar moments earlier.

The lawman said, "Howdy, Westrum. I sort of figgered this was your doing."

Westrum put down the cards on the table. "Bill, untie his hands. Then you and Moss stand guard outside. Me and the sheriff are gonna have a talk.... Sit down, Corey. There in that chair across the table. And remember, no false moves. I've got my gun handy." He drew the six-shooter from his belt and laid it beside the deck of playing cards on the table.

Bart waited until the two men had left the cabin. Then he asked, "Just what is it you're after, Westrum?"

The XT boss produced a folded paper from his pocket. "Sheriff, I got something here I want you to sign. After that, you can be on your way."

Bart gave the other a puzzled stare. "You brought me here just to sign some paper? Could it be my resignation?"

Westrum smiled slightly. "It could be, but it ain't. However, I think it'll serve the same purpose." He leaned forward and held out the paper to Bart. "Go ahead. Read it."

The lawman accepted it with a dubious frown, quickly ran his eyes down the page of hurriedly-scrawled handwriting. It was a purported confession that Bart and Red Mabery had been secret partners, and that the lawman had shared in the illicit profits from running off XT stock. That Bart had himself killed Red to keep his double dealing from being exposed.

Bart gave an angry snort and flung the paper down on the table. "You actually figger I'd be fool enough to sign that, Westrum? You don't credit me with having much sense, do you?"

"Personally, I think you'd be usin' a heap of good sense if you did. You see, Sheriff, what that paper is, is simply insurance. Insurance that you'll get out of these parts as swiftly as you can. I don't mind admittin' that you're gettin' to be quite a thorn in XT's side. And the way things look, you could throw a wrench into some future plans we've made. By the way, I suppose it was that damn Red Mabery who spilled the beans about Carew?"

Bart nodded. "He did say the Judge was taking XT money."

"I thought so. Too bad he wasn't shut up before he did all that jawin'. Well—" he shrugged heavy shoulders—"that ain't important now. The only thing that matters is that you should light out of these parts pronto."

"I like it here," Bart said. "I got no intention of leaving. That's why I'm not signing any confessions of murder."

Mort Westrum's jaw seemed to jut out more prominently, and tiny sparks of anger kindled in his eyes. "You ain't got much choice, Corey. How much chance you think you have of walkin' out of here alive if you refuse to put your name to that paper?"

Bart had a feeling that the other man was not bluffing, but he warned, "Like I said to you once before, even you and XT ain't big enough to get away with murdering a lawman. You should know that, Westrum!"

"Who said XT had any intention of murderin' a lawman?"

Bart frowned. "But just a minute ago you said—"

"I said you wouldn't leave this camp alive. But that won't be any of XT's doin's. You can't saddle XT with any blame just because the sheriff and an escapin' prisoner shoot it out on XT property and the sheriff gets killed."

"Escaping prisoner?" Bart's voice was puzzled. "What you mean by that?"

CHAPTER VIII

LAST CHANCE

WESTRUM seemed to be enjoying the bewilderment in Bart's eyes. "Maybe you think Larkin is still in his jail cell back in Elk City? I happen to know better. If everything's come off the way we planned, Jess is free as air this minute and headed straight for this cabin. He's been told fresh horses are waitin' for him here and he ain't likely to lose much time."

Bart shook his head. "It won't stand up, Westrum. Folks will guess that the masked riders that come for me were XT men, and that it was XT that busted Larkin out of jail—if the jailbreak succeeded. They'll know the whole thing was a put-up job."

A confident smile shaped the heavy-set man's arrogant features. "Will they? Just for the record, Larkin and the two men who rode to town with

him yesterday had gotten their walkin' papers that same mornin'. Half a dozen XT men will swear to that if necessary. And they'll swear further that Larkin threatened to get even with me. So it certainly wouldn't make sense to think XT had anything to do with breakin' him out of jail!"

"That still wouldn't explain how I happened to be here at this XT line camp."

"Why, you just wandered in here after those masked men turned you loose in the hills. Everybody will finger them to be friends of Larkin who abducted you just to draw a posse out of town and make it easier for Jess to get away."

Bart said stubbornly, "You're setting a low estimate on the intelligence of folks hereabouts. They'll never believe that kind of a trumped-up story. They'll know you and Larkin are in this together."

"Even if Larkin was to be cut down himself by XT bullets, after he'd bested you in a shootin' duel?"

The lawman's eyes widened in shocked surprise. "You'd do that to Jess? Your own rider?"

"That gives you a turn, does it, Sheriff?" Westrum's wide face had taken on a faintly contemptuous look. "Well, let me tell you this! When a man plays for big stakes, he's a fool if he lets sentiment or friendship enter in. I'd sacrifice a hundred men like Larkin if it was in XT's interest to do so! And, anyhow, after what's happened, Larkin has lost his usefulness to me."

Bart stared at the XT boss with a kind of disbelief, as though unwilling to credit his utter callousness. He did not speak.

Westrum leaned forward in his chair. "Use your head, Corey. Sign that paper and you can be twenty miles from here by mornin'. The West is a big place and—"

The ranch manager stopped, and seemed to listen. Bart heard it then, too—the swelling thud of hooves as a

horse raced toward the cabin. Westrum frowned a little and caught up the gun lying on the table. "You ain't got long to make up your mind. That may be Larkin now. Take my offer and I'll get rid of him. Turn me down and..."

Moss poked his head in the door and said, "It's Judge Carew, boss. You wanna see him?"

Westrum nodded. "Yeah. Let him come in."

SHORTLY Carew, his clothes powdered with the dust of a hard ride, came into the cabin. There was a strangely agitated look on his finely-proportioned features, and a tiny muscle at one side of his mouth seemed to twitch nervously. He halted just inside the door and looked over at Bart.

"What you doin' here, Judge?" Westrum's tone was faintly puzzled. "Anything go wrong in town?"

Carew shook his head mechanically, as though his thoughts were on something else. "Larkin got clean away, if that's what you want to know," he said listlessly.

"Then why'd you ride out here?"

The jurist's face looked haggard in the lamplight. "Westrum—" his voice sounded suddenly hoarse "—Westrum, you can't go through with it! Sending innocent men to jail is bad enough! But murder! —I can't be a party to it!"

"Shut up, you fool!" Westrum had jerked upright in his chair. His fingers seemed to tighten about the butt of the gun in his hand. "Who said anything about murder?"

Bart spoke up then. "He didn't give away anything I didn't already know, Westrum. You think I believed that hogwash about turning me loose if I signed that confession? Why, if I signed that, you could hang me to the nearest tree, and no one would ever question XT's right to do it."

The XT boss glowered across the room, his eyes bright with anger under

the joined line of his heavy black brows.

"Judge, you haven't got the guts of a jackrabbit!" he snarled. "But that won't make any difference. You're too far in this now to back down!"

The handsome, silvery-haired jurist gazed at Westrum with a sharpening expression of horror in his eyes. He watched him like a man regards a loathesomely coiling snake. But then he straightened and showed a flash of his courtroom authority, as he said crisply, "You go through with this scheme, Westrum, and you'll hang!"

Westrum's smile held no humour, only a kind of savagery. "You won't talk, Judge! You're too fond of that daughter of yours. You'd never saddle her with the disgrace of knowin' what her old man is really like!"

Bart saw Judge Carew's face whiten. He stood there with a look of uncertainty in his eyes, shoulders sagging slightly.

It wasn't long after that that the silence of the cabin was broken by the far-off clatter of a horse, approaching from up the valley.

Westrum heaved quickly to his feet. "Your last chance, Sheriff," he said harshly. "I swear that if you put your signature to that paper on the table—"

"Better drop that gun, Mort," said Carew from across the room.

A STARTLED expression crossed Westrum's face, as he turned his head and saw the leveled six-gun in the judge's hand. For a moment, he stared in complete disbelief. Then rage mounted in his eyes, but there was also the realization that he was in a position disadvantageous for any sudden attempt at gun-play. Before he could wheel around and take aim, Carew would have time to pull the trigger once, perhaps twice.

"Judge, you made a fool play," Mort Westrum said gruffly. "You'll never get out of this cabin alive."

But he allowed the gun to slip from his fingers.

Bart had looked on with astonishment as great as Westrum's. But now, as Judge Carew cried out, "Quickly, Bart!—the gun!" he scrambled up, moved around the table and scooped up Westrum's gun.

Before he could straighten up, he heard the sound of shattering glass from one of the cabin windows. This was followed immediately by the crash of a shot.

Carew staggered under the shock of a bullet and pressed one hand to his side. But he managed to whirl around and blast three quick shots at the window. Then he lurched against the wall of the cabin and started to sink slowly to his knees.

At almost the same instant, the cabin door banged open and Moss dived across the threshold. He threw a hurried shot that whined unpleasantly close to the lawman's head. Then a bullet from Bart's gun took him in the chest, rocked him back on his heels. The man's mouth fell open, his lips moved soundlessly, and he pitched forward onto his face.

As Bart swung toward the door, he had been forced to halfway turn his back on Westrum. Now the XT boss was on him, clamping solid-muscled arms about his body and thrusting him off-balance. The gun, jolted from Bart's grasp, made a noisy clatter on the flooring planks as it fell out of reach. Both men thudded to the floor and thrashed around desperately.

In the darkness outside the cabin, a horse was drawing up. A voice called, "What the hell's goin' on in there?"

As Bart sought frantically to break Westrum's hold the other man roared exultantly, "In here, Larkin! Hurry!"

Bart wrenched an arm free and brought his elbow around sharply. As the blow took Westrum in the face, he cried out in pain and his grip loosened. Bart broke away, rolled over quickly and ended up on hands and knees beside the table. Acting on a sudden inspiration, he reached out and

gave the table a violent shove that dumped the kerosene lamp onto the floor. Glass shattered loudly, and the cabin was engulfed in blackness.

Westrum was making enraged sounds deep in his throat as he stumbled erect. Bart caught a glimpse of his bulky frame as it moved against the square of the window. Sudden gun-flame spurted from the doorway, and Westrum gave a gasp and fell over.

Bart's quick glance discovered the tall, indistinct figure looming in the doorway. With desperate haste, he launched himself in a headlong dive, his shoulder crashing solidly against booted ankles. The other man gave a yell of surprise and toppled forward. He must have struck his head on the door because he instantly went limp.

The lawman groped in the darkness for the newcomer's gun, found it, and arose. Cautiously, he stepped from the cabin, wondering what had happened to the fourth XT man. A moment later, pale moonlight revealed him sprawled on his back beside a window at the north end of the cabin. One of Judge Carew's bullets had made a bloody mess of his left eye, boring into his brain.

TEN MINUTES later, the kerosene lamp, minus its shattered chimney, threw a wildly flickering light across the cabin's interior. Bart had dragged the bodies of Westrum and Moss outside, and he had trussed Jess Larkin up securely with a length of rope from the cabin wall. Now he worked earnestly to do what he could for Judge Carew, who clung precariously to life.

After a while, the silvery-haired man opened his eyes. He said, "Guess it's pretty bad, isn't it, Bart?"

"Bad?" Bart kept from meeting the jurist's probing glance. "Hell no, Judge. It's hardly more'n a scratch. You'll be forking a horse in a couple of weeks' time."

Judge Carew managed a faint smile. "We both know better than that, Bart."

Anyhow, I'm glad it turned out this way. Somehow I think it'll be easier on Ellie."

Bart licked his lips. "Judge, I promise Ellie will never know— As far as I'm concerned, you wiped the slate clean when you blocked Westrum's plans to-night."

After a while, Carew started to speak, brushing aside Bart's objections. "Got to tell you, Bart. Ellie— she's in love with you. Fooled me. I thought it was that banker fellow. But when she returned to town with news about you being taken prisoner, it was all there on her face. That's why I had to ride out here—to—stop— I heard from Ellie that you had made plans for an evening drive to Cottonwood Creek. That's how Westrum knew..."

The judge stopped talking, and Bart saw that he had said everything he would say in this world. Bart got to his feet with a sigh.

He saddled a pair of horses from the half dozen he found in a pole corral not far from the cabin. He hoisted Larkin into the saddle, and the two horses moved up the valley toward the trail leading to the rim-rock. Halfway to town, he encountered Sim Tate and a large group of Elk City citizens.

To them he gave a not entirely factual account of what had happened. Even if he had to turn in his badge to do it, he was determined to keep the extent of Judge Carew's participation in Westrum's schemes a secret from Ellie and the rest of them.

Only one thing troubled him now. Bart drew his brows into a frown as he considered Jamison and his three neighbors. They would remain behind bars until indisputable evidence was uncovered to set them free. And where would Bart find that evidence...?

Larkin sat on a cot in his cell in the Elk City jail, and there was a sick fear in his eyes as he stared up at Bart. "I didn't mean to kill Westrum. You know that, Sheriff."

Bart nodded grimly. "No. You meant to kill me. However, Westrum's dead and it looks like you'll swing for the killing unless—"

Jess Larkin ran his tongue along his lips. His eyes were anxious. "Unless what, Sheriff?"

"Well, the cabin was dark, and I could say I didn't see who killed Westrum. But if I did that, you'd have to make a full confession about how you and the other XT riders were responsible for the butchered XT cows being found on Jamison's homestead."

Larkin looked relieved. He said hastily, "It's a deal, Sheriff."

Leaving the jail, Bart headed for the Carew house. Ellie would have learned about her father by now, and she would be needing someone.

THE END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF

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ABRAHAM GOODMAN
(Signature of business manager)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 10th day of September, 1952. Tass Harwood (My Commission expires March 30, 1954). (SEAL)

(cont'd from page 10)

doorway and windows of the work car.

What followed was like small war. Morales was well armed. He had a plentiful supply of ammunition. And he fought back.

Shot after shot, from both sixguns and rifles, came from the Mexicans little fort in the work car.

And a barrage of fire from the officers raked the car, end to end.

"Wait!" somebody yelled. "A white flag."

The firing ceased. A Mexican stepped from the car door, hands in the air.

"That's not Morales," one of the officers said. "Must be his brother."

And it was Morales' brother, anxious to surrender.

"Somebody take him 'way off to a good stout jail, somewhere," an officer said. "Otherwise there'll be a lynching when the rest of this army gets here."

The killer's brother was taken away by car to a distant jail, later to stand trial as an accomplice. Then the posse settled down again to the grim, dangerous job of getting Morales.

Other members of the big posse began to arrive on the scene. A car was dispatched to bring dynamite.

FOR A LITTLE, there had been no answering return of fire from within the car. Out of sight of the windows and doors, men crawled forward and planted the box of dynamite under the car. The fuse was lighted. The officers took cover behind embankments and the other cars in the string.

The explosion came, but it only partially wrecked one end of the car. A new burst of gunfire came from

within. Morales was still making a stand.

The machinegun from Merkel was on the scene by now. National Guardsmen set it up.

"We're ready when you are," a Guardsman told Sheriff Yarbrough.

"Wait a minute," Yarbrough said.

Once more he and the others called across to Morales, urging him to surrender. There was no answer, not even a gun shot.

Shadows were lengthening and the first blue of dusk was touching the scene.

Yarbrough said quietly, "I got a hunch it's all over, men."

He was right. They found Morales inside the bullet-riddled car—dead. His body bore many wounds of the battle.

Out through the wreckage of the car they carried his body. All about were the weathered, unshaven faces of hard-jawed old Texans, their Winchesters and Colts clutched in their hands. Contrasting with that scene of the Old West were the touches of the New—an airplane circling overhead, the machine gun on its tripod at the crest of an embankment, car lights on the roads like hundreds of giant fireflies.

They put the dead Morales into a car. Silently the procession headed for Merkel. From there, officers, ranchers, farmers, business men, and Guardsmen dispersed and headed for their homes, some a hundred miles away.

When the West Texas Sheriffs' Association met in Sweetwater a few weeks later, Mrs. W. W. Satterwhite, widow of the slain sheriff, was elected secretary of the Association. She had been appointed sheriff of Howard County to succeed her husband.

THE END

THE MAN ON THE STAGE*(cont'd from page 59)*

IC & KT Express. Norah Forrest was Rupp's hostage, but when Rupp left the country he would want his gold and he would need a coach to travel in.

COLE FOUGHT his way through the ranks of Vigilantes, through the crowd of curious onlookers. Fire-fighting equipment was moving up, ladders, wagons loaded with tanks and buckets, and this further slowed him. There was, in Cole, a feeling of time forever lost, and desperation turned him frantic. For the moment, Norah was useful to Rupp, for she guaranteed his escape. Later, when he had made good his escape...

At a tearing run, Cole rounded the last corner, and even from here could see the still form that lay on the walk before the Planter's House. Upstreet, a coach swayed and rocked as its galloping horses took it swiftly out of town, heading eastward along the road toward Leavenworth.

Cole paused for a brief instant beside the body that lay on the walk. Jess Dyer, in death, still showed the evil and ugliness that had been so apparent in him in life. Cole was reminded of his own words to Dyer, "You can die as quickly as any man," and he knew that Dyer had never believed it until perhaps the last moment as Rupp fired the fatal shot.

Beside the body lay a small trunk, spilled open, its contents plainly Dyer's clothes and personal belongings. Cole muttered, "You were skipping with the gold and Rupp caught you. Now he's got the gold, and he's got Norah too."

The rack before the hotel held half a dozen drowsing horses, and Cole picked a tall and glossy black, swinging into the saddle as the horse broke into his run. His left arm had scarcely the strength to hold the reins, but he would need his right for the revolver. His heels drummed on

the black's sides, urging the speeding animal to even greater exertion. Ahead, the coach was only a speck ahead of its rising dust cloud.

The grain-fed horse began to sweat, but Cole slowly closed the distance between himself and the coach. While he was yet a hundred yards behind, Rupp opened fire with his rifle, steadying it on the baggage pile atop the Concord.

Cole, helpless to return the fire because of Norah inside and because of the uncertainty of shooting from the back of a running horse, was forced to face Rupp's deadly fire with only the swerving of his horse from side to side to throw it off.

Then the gap had closed until he was directly behind the coach, and sheltered from Rupp's fire by the Concord itself. Still there was no sign of Norah.

Cole drew slowly ahead on the right side of the coach now, and peering inside, saw the sprawled and unconscious form of Norah, half on the seat, half on the floor, pounded mercilessly from side to side by the rocking of the coach. Further he drew ahead until he could see Rupp, his hands full with the bolting teams, but holding them with his left hand only while his right turned a revolver back toward Cole.

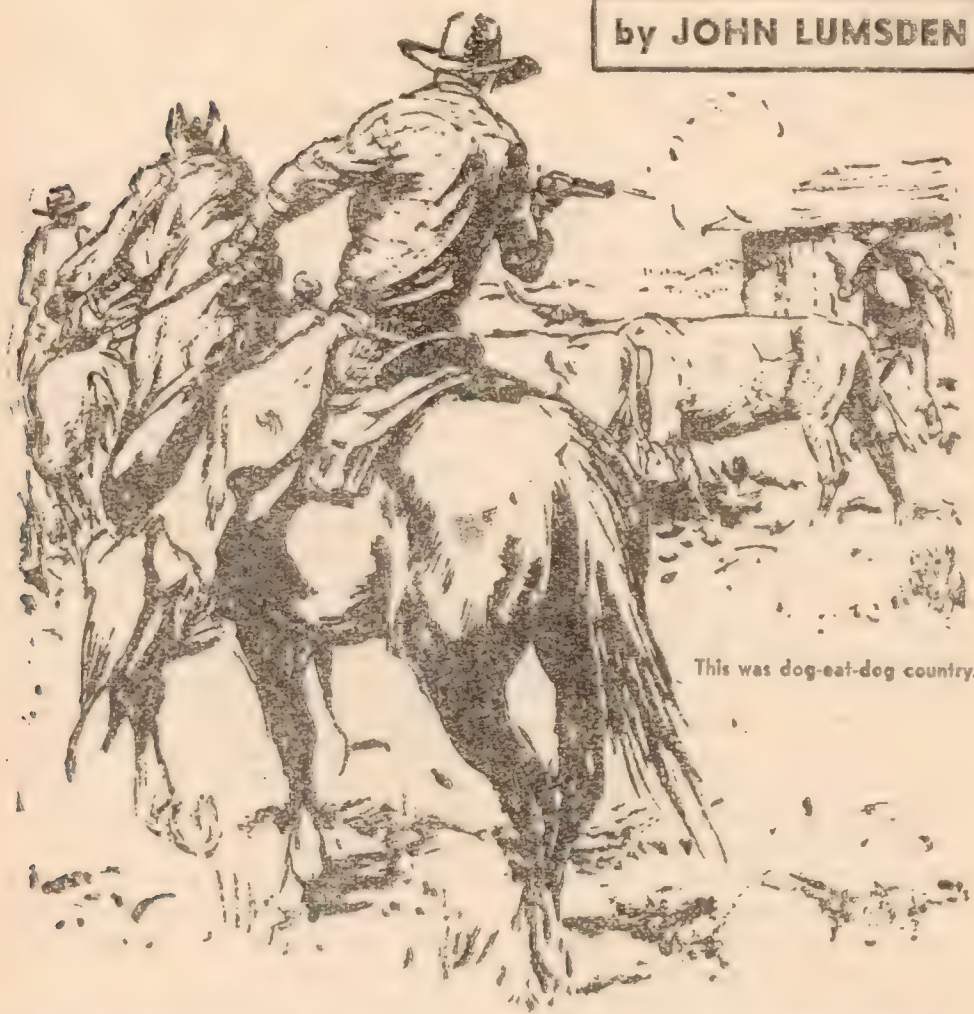
The flame and smoke from Rupp's gun were acrid and blinding in Cole's face, and the man's face was a mask of hate and rage. Cole raised his own gun, snap shot as the sights centered on Rupp's naked and hairy chest.

The big man howled, a roar of mingled pain and shock, stood up on the seat and pitched off, directly in front of Cole's galloping black. Cole felt the lift as the black soared over him, was nearly unseated by the shock and surprise of it. The coach had drawn ahead in this short instant, but now Cole drummed on the black's wet sides and forced him abreast.

(please turn to page 124)

A HUNDRED NOTCHES IN HIS GUN - BUTT

by JOHN LUMSDEN



This was dog-eat-dog country.

**The button sized Williams as a badman — maybe that's
what he was**

“THAT’S it, I’m a badman.”
The youngster looked then
at Jack Williams’ holster. As
though expecting, with his new insight
into the character of this new rider
of his father’s, that the holster would
now have somehow changed. Or as
though he might now find some spe-
cial badman qualities about it.

“How many notches do you have in
your gun?”

“Carved in the butt of my gun you
mean? An even hundred.”

Billy thought about that for a few
moments.

“I don’t think my father has killed
that many men.”

“Well he isn’t a badman. That

makes a difference...."

"How many men have you killed, Daddy?" Billy asked his father later that morning.

"Killed?" John Farrow laughed. "I haven't killed any men, son, and I hope never to have to kill any."

"Mr. Williams has killed even a hundred men."

"Hoh! I'm afraid Mr. Williams was spoofing you, son."

"No he wasn't. He's a badman. That makes a difference..."

"Golly," Farrow said to his wife at lunch. "The ideas these kids get these days. By 1900 I predict they'll all be gunmen."

"What now?" Alice Farrow said.

Billy glanced up from shovelling baked beans into his mouth.

"Mr. Williams is a badman," he mumbled through the food.

"Billy, I've asked you not to speak when your mouth is full of food." And to Farrow: "I'm afraid your son left all his table manners in St. Louis."

Billy's eyes were back on his plate, unconcerned. Table manners were not a very serious matter when a fellow's head was full of things like badmen and notches in guns.

"What's this about Mr. Williams?" Alice Farrow said then to Billy. "He seems like a very nice man to me."

"He's killed even a hundred men," Billy said, after first exaggeratedly emptying his mouth with one big gulp.

"Oh my heavens," Alice Farrow gasped. She pursed in her lips, shaking her head with knowing amusement at her husband. "Honestly," she added....

"I'LL ASK the boss," Jack Williams said. This was his second day riding for John Farrow's J-F Connected.

"Well, heck, you don't need to bother—" Ned Haley began, lifting his stetson off and tugging it back

on again. Jack Williams looked at Haley's pearl-grey stetson. It had a look, he thought, just like Haley: thin and soft and yet always set kind of jaunty.

"Sure," Jack Williams said, "I'll speak to him. What, is this the only water anywhere near your place? I mean besides the well up at the house?"

Ned Haley was nodding, sweeping out an arm to point back over the rise behind him. They were sitting their horses at the fence that ran in a fairly straight line here between the small Haley spread and the big Farrow spread. The early morning sun, still pale, reflected however in a blinding splash off the waterhole fifty feet inside the Farrow line.

"That's it," Ned Haley said. "I've got that hole back there at the house, but outside of that there isn't a blame thing I can count on. The 'spring' under the north ledge turned out to be a wet-weather spring only. And I tried to get old man Kittinger to rent me a right of way to one of his holes but—"

"I'll speak to the boss. Well, I got to be getting to my chores. It was nice meeting you. Don't worry about the water, fella."

Ned Haley did the nervous, eager gesture with his stetson again, called after Jack Williams, "Well, thanks, mister!"

"YOU INTERESTED in this Haley?" old Kittinger said at about this same moment to his step-daughter. Kittinger was another one with a big holding; his acreage and John Farrow's were the big slices of bread that sandwiched the scrap of meat that was Ned Haley's two-bit spread. Alec Kittinger had married three times; Janice was the child of his present new wife.

"Oh yes," Janice replied frankly.

She was a very "open" girl that way. Her wide, calm blue eyes bespoke this. And her lovely peach-bloom complexion. And her luxuriant dark hair,

that came to her shoulders and made her seem younger than her eighteen years. And she'd ride usually, as now, bareback, with a rope for reins; and she stood in a very girlish rather than womanly attitude, too, with her feet, usually in moccasins, set wide apart and almost pigeon-toed, with her tan legs bare.

"You don't know anything about him," Kittinger said. "Neither do I. He just bought that piece, you know—or did you know—a year or so ago. It's a worthless stretch, too, so he ain't a very brainy youngster."

They had been riding in from town along the part of the road that skirted Ned Haley's fence. Janice kept looking off toward where Haley's house would be beyond the rise that half circled it.

"Oh I think he's very brainy."

Old Kittinger wrinkled up his flat duck-bill nose in a sour grimace as of distaste. He must have been nearing his seventies, but there was still a pronounced youthful vigor about him; in the sparkle of his washed-out blue eyes, in the firmness of his weather-wrinkled skin; in the sanguine swirl of his only partially grey hair at the nape of his neck.

"Hunh," he grunted.

"There's Ned now," Janice said. "Hey!" she yelled, waving.

Ned Haley had appeared on the rise, having ridden up from the other side of it. Seeing Janice, he waved too, with both hands. Old Kittinger had lifted one bushy eyebrow in that direction. He winced sourly. *That waving with both hands, he thought. Like a blamed ninny. A fine one to be startin' up a cattle lay-out in this dog-eat-dog country—*

"You like him, eh," Kittinger grunted, but Janice didn't hear this.

JACK WILLIAMS put his left foot back, to steady himself, to brace himself, when the thrown fist took him full in the face. It was somehow an unyouthful gesture; it was more

like an old man would do, under such a staggering impact, trying not to give away his age, trying to keep up an appearance of sturdiness.

So it carried a kind of significance, perhaps, that single step backwards. Because Jack Williams was not old, not by any means. He was, at best, no more than thirty. Perhaps a sort of maturity was revealed in that weak move—a readiness to see all sides of a matter, and so a capacity for being pretty easily jolted out of this fence-sitting position.

And you found this confirmed if you studied Jack Williams' face. It was a pleasant face. Average, lean, a relaxed mouth.

The eyes, though, were hard to get hold of. They told you nothing. You got only flashes of their steel-grey-ness, because they were always somehow irritatingly somewhere else when you tried to peer into them.

So, here again, the unyouthfulness, the kind of weakness, came through to give you an uncertain impression of Jack Williams. One minute you thought that you liked him, that what the devil what did you want, he was an all right ranny. But later, another minute, your impression got that uncomfortable quality about it. So that finally you were sure of only one thing about Jack Williams: that you'd never feel sure of anything about him.

Another newcomer to this range threw the fist. A fellow, in fact, who'd ridden in less than an hour before. He told the sheriff afterwards. A real hard one, an unmistakable gunman, who'd probably won his living holding up stages and banks more often than, more respectably, he'd hired out his gun to ambitious cattlemen.

Mounting the saloon steps, he'd seen Jack Williams. Coming along the boardwalk. And he'd gone down and slugged him. Muttering, "I told you I'd find you someday."

That backward step of Jack Williams', though, and all the meaning you might have found in it, wholly be-

lied his next action. He threw a punch then himself. No mere reflexive flail either. There was professional control of the fist Jack Williams sent. It was short, his blow, but exact. It went to the newcomer's heart like a battering ram. It was a crippler; the fellow half doubled.

He brought an uppercut from there though that might have done for Jack Williams if he hadn't turned his head to the fractional angle that let its fury be spent skyward. Then Jack Williams chopped the stranger to ribbons. Once, in the middle of it, the hardcase stopped abruptly to study in puzzlement, with his one unclosed eye, Jack Williams' face. "Hey, I got the wrong gent," he said. And when the sheriff dragged him to his feet afterwards he said that again. "I made a mistake," he said.... "Sure," the lawman said. "And now how about you hightail the devil right back where you came from."

"Old friend of yours?" the sheriff said to Jack Williams, walking away.

Jack Williams was batting his stetson on his leg, the heavy dust the hat had fallen into, exploding out.

"Never saw him before."

"Loco with the heat, eh?"

"Must have been."

"THE SECOND day he's here he gets together with Haley, which was kind of funny in the first place, if you wanted to think about it. The same afternoon he gets in a fight in town with a gunman—who'd been looking for him, they're saying. And now this evening, the third day he's been working for me mind you, he comes to me and asks me is there 'any way we could arrange to share' our best waterhole with Haley! *His third day*—and he talks right up to me as calm and plain as you please, like he was my foreman or my partner or something!"

Alice Farrow listened undisturbed, looking from one of her husband's eyes

to the other in the judicial way she had.

"Well that's all right isn't it? I mean for him to do that?"

"It's *all right*, I guess, but golly—"

"Mr. Williams is a badman," Billy said from the floor behind the fireplace seat his parents were occupying, where he was virtually standing on his head building something with blocks.

"You keep quiet, Billy," Alice Farrow flung over her shoulder. "So what did you tell him, John?"

"Oh, I said I'd *talk* to Haley about it, naturally. But golly, I don't know."

"He's killed even a hundred men," Billy said almost in a whisper, but coming timed into the interval, it was very audible.

"What do you mean, 'you don't know'?"

"What I mean, I guess, is that Williams somehow rubs me the wrong way."

"I think you're making an awful lot out of nothing, John."

"Maybe. Maybe."

Outside, later, finishing his pipe before turning in, John Farrow thought. *And where did Billy get that "badman" stuff, anyway?*...

IT WAS A night that went with slow-elking. The clouds were moving a little, after rain. They and the sky were washed clear, and what the moon lay its silver and shadow on, loomed eerie.

The rider appeared periodically piecemeal. From behind boulders. As an extension of a Joshua tree.... The cattle he was moving came and went that way too.

The whole business had a great quietness about it, too, with the moon going in and out as the clouds glided silently along. The rider must have felt an uneasiness at its very success, for he nervously tugged his stetson into new adjustment every so often.

And the whole business might well have gone off thus smoothly right to completion if a Farrow hand, Miles

Miller, hadn't happened to take the shortcut back from town this night.

Miles Miller was a good man. He put loyalty to his job above personal safety. He unlimbered his big .45 and started firing without delay. He saw one of his bullets flip the stetson off the rustler's head, but he didn't know whether he hit the fellow.

No answering shot came, and Miles worked his horse fast among the boulders dumped down the slope, to reach in less than a minute the spot where he'd glimpsed the slow-elker and the milling cattle.

To be sure, then, Miles swung off and checked one of the critters for the J-F Connected. He grunted, finding his boss' brand, thumbed back the hammer on the last cartridge left in his gun, peered about.

He saw only cattle.

"Come out o' there, yuh stinkin' cow-thief!" he roared....

"IT HAD TO be somebody with a spread where he could put the stolen critters, didn't it?" one J-F Connected rider drawled.

John Farrow had called his crew together the following morning. It was a dazzling clear day, and the men were draped around the doorways of the two parallel bunkhouses, all squinting against the bright sunlight.

"No it didn't," Farrow said. "The town has been crawling with strangers lately, and any of them could have come with a proposition to drive away slow-elked beef."

Toothpicks, matchsticks, were shifted across strong white teeth, broken yellow teeth; the Farrow crew had all kinds, all ages, hired only for proven skill with rope or gun.

"So I'm not accusing anybody here, but all I wanted to say was, somebody usually delivers stolen beef, somebody on the inside—and it was probably such a one that Miles Miller stopped last night." John Farrow paused, scanned the faces of his men narrowly, *carefully making a point*, he real-

ized, *of not meeting Jack Williams' eyes*. Then he said in measured tones, "We have one clue: Miles shot off the thief's hat. So anybody with a new stetson or a hole through his old one—"

"Had better hightail hell-for-leather while he's still able," another rider supplied with a gruff laugh.

Others guffawed, and everybody carefully didn't glance at anybody else's stetson.

"The point I want to make though," John Farrow went on, "is that I'd appreciate being told of any evidence in this connection that any of you comes across."

JACK WILLIAMS rode out on range with the other men, then as they scattered to separate assignments, he gradually worked his horse in and out of brush and boulders until he was out of sight of any of his mates.

Then he rode on a comparatively straight line. Not with new haste, but obviously with an objective. He rode toward town. If anybody had kept an eye on him, he would look as if he were riding to town. He took the road that went up through the timber to the north, and then deep in there, he turned his animal's head to the right and picked his way through the close-standing trees.

Thus roundabout, he came out at a point along the Haley boundary. He hitched his horse to one of the posts and ducked under the wire and walked toward the house.

It was as he approached the back door that he heard the voices. He stopped in his tracks, glanced quickly about. There was nothing at hand that he could use as a blind.

So he walked on to the door, stepping very quietly but relaxed lest he be seen and look like he were eavesdropping, and paused just outside the screen door, to one side of it.

He stood there, where if somebody came to the door he could seem to be just arriving, and listened—

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"I think we should get married now," the girl's voice said.

"No, I think we'd better wait," Ned Haley's voice came.

After a pause, the girl said, "I'd like to know what's gotten into you. Yesterday you were the one who was pushing me, today you're all—all different. What's the matter, Ned?"

"Well, I've been figuring—the money and all, and I don't know whether I could—could support a wife yet—"

"Oh nonsense. What about the J-F waterhole? Did that Mr. Williams or whatever his name was, find out about it yet?"

"No, I haven't seen him since he offered to try to arrange it."

The pause came again. Then Ned said, "You see, Janice, we ought to have a hunk of cash to start out with and—"

"Will you please stop weighing our love as if it were so much merchandise? You're getting along all right alone, aren't you? Well whatever you're living on now we can both live on. I'll promise to eat very little."

Ned gave an empty little laugh.

Janice said, "So can we be married at once then please?"

Something suddenly crashed inside the house and there was the sound like of somebody scrambling up out of a hastily shoved-back chair.

Janice said impatiently. "What in heaven's name is the matter with you today? I drop this old cracked cup on the floor and you leap up as if you'd been shot!"

"Golly, I don't know.... I reckon I'm just loco, or something.... Look, honey, this is the thing: I just have to wait a while. There's a—a thing I want to be sure about first—"

"You mean the waterhole?"

"Uh—yeah, that's it. That's it, the waterhole. I want to be sure about the waterhole first, and then we'll get married."

"Ned Haley, you know that isn't that important. After we're married, you can use Father's water. He'd have

to give you permission when you're his son-in-law—"

He's the one all right, Jack Williams thought. And he doesn't want to get the girl involved with him until he knows whether or not they track him down....

Jack Williams rapped lightly on the screen door. When they came to the door he said to Haley, "I spoke to Farrow about the waterhole, and he said he'd talk to you about it. So you'll just have to wait until he gets around to it."

"Oh sure. Well, fine." Ned Haley grinned, letting out tight-held-back breath. "Sure, no hurry about it. Well, thanks very much, mister, that was mighty nice of you—"

JACK WILLIAMS, somehow, did a lot of thinking about Ned Haley in the next two days. It was funny anyway, his having got involved with him in the first place. He didn't know why he'd done it exactly. He'd seen Ned Haley that first day, and somehow he was taken with him—sort of like a father who'd lost his only son would fasten onto some other young man and transfer all his affection, out of all proportion, to him.

With Jack Williams, of course, it was nothing of that sort. Or on the other hand, when he came to think about it, *wasn't* it something of that sort. Maybe, in Ned Haley, he saw the kid he'd once been. Before he grew up. Ned Haley looked like he was going through that same kind of weak period that he had; probably most youngsters did, to one degree or another, at that time when their ambition and their imagination ran away with them, so that they acted crazy in a way they never would again in later life, and sometimes tragically, with results for which they paid the remainder of their span....

That's what this rustling deal was, Jack Williams felt sure, somehow, with Ned Haley: the kid was in the toils of his first growing-up pains; he was in

love, he wanted money quick to get married, he hadn't yet learned how deadly-serious breaking out of the bonds of The Law could be. How, before you knew it, you could be mixed up in a murder, even....

Like, for example, he had. Like Jack Williams had. He and the son of a wealthy rancher had wanted the same girl. They'd fought, and the fellow had beaten the tar out of Jack Williams, and afterwards, having brooded himself into a senseless rage, he'd jumped out at the fellow and the girl when they were on a ride, and brandished a gun. And when the fellow had stepped down and come at him—Jack Williams had shot him. And the fellow died from it. And Jack Williams had been running ever since. Sometimes he could hardly believe the whole thing happened, now that just plain growing up had sobered him out of any more such wild, violent ideas. Here he was as decent a man as any other—but nothing he could do, the rest of his life, however noble or constructive, could wipe out the black brand put on him by that one crazy youth-born act.

Or was there a thing he could do. Suddenly, that peculiar third day after going to see Ned Haley, he let the thought come to the forefront of his mind. It had been there all along, but he hadn't wanted to recognize it.

Because he knew that once he did recognize it, he'd never be able to live with himself until he acted on it.

Because his conscience or whatever the devil it was, told him that here was his chance to clear his slate. *If you think you would have been such a fine one except for that one senseless slip*, his conscience was saying in effect, *here is your chance to prove it—ready-made by Fate for you.*

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Jack Williams chewed a matchstick to a shred, and slammed it away from

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him as he would have a rock, coming out of the eatshack that noon.

"What's the matter, fella?" one of the other hands said quietly.

"Matter? Nothing."

He got his horse to ride out to the draw they were working this day.

But suppose the kid was never discovered. Certainly Farrow didn't seem to have any such suspicion. What was the sense in his drawing the blame off the kid by making himself look guilty, when there was a good chance the kid would not even be blamed—

Jack Williams became aware of his horse slowly, looked up and saw that the riders he was working with were just ahead.

Sure, this welcome new thought intruded, what the devil. Maybe you'd just be getting yourself a stretch behind bars for nothing—

"Williams."

He jerked around, at hearing his name called by John Farrow, as if the man had put a gun muzzle in his back.

"I want a word with you, Williams."

JOHAN FARROW had evidently been waiting behind some of the boulders here at the mouth of the draw. He had also evidently waited until Jack Williams was well into its bottleneck, before showing—

What Jack Williams noted more than this, though, was that John Farrow was wearing a gun—and Farrow seldom carried armament.

And what Jack Williams noted further was that Farrow was flanked by three of his riders: Olsen, Peters, and Mahaffay—the three he was known to have hired for their gun reps more than their skill as cow-nurses.

"I'll come directly to the point, Williams. I've gone into this rustling affair thoroughly, and it narrows down to two suspects."

Jack Williams suddenly felt the pressure of his own holster against his thigh. Not having used his gun for a

long time, he had an impulse to look down at it, see what shape it was in, how available; at least to put a hand to it, make sure it was riding free—

"Ned Haley is the one, Williams. You are the other."

He'd turned his horse, as Farrow talked, to face the rancher and the three gunsters. And they had squared off too, elbow to elbow—

"One of my riders came to me this morning with the information that Ned Haley always wore a grey stetson, but that in the past three days he'd been wearing an old army hat. And another of my riders came to me and stated that during the past three days you had been wearing a different hat than when you started working for me.

"I haven't checked on Ned Haley yet. For all I know so far, maybe you were both in it, together. I know you and Haley got very friendly mighty quick. But I came to you first, Williams, because frankly I somehow felt from the beginning that there was something shady about you."

Jack Williams suddenly cleared his throat, and he found that it cleared with difficulty.

"Haley is your man," he said.

John Farrow didn't look as if he didn't remove his cold gaze from Jack Williams a fraction of an inch.

"That's just what I figured you'd say, Williams," he finally said in measured tones. "That's exactly what I thought you'd say."

"Sure. Haley's your man. He tried to get me to go in with him but I wouldn't do it."

John Farrow didn't look as if he listened to this. He looked rather as if all his attention were turned inward, onto deductions he was confidently arriving at.

"Do you know what I also figured, Williams? That the reason you got so friendly with Haley so quick was so you could put the blame for your cattle-stealing on him. So you could easily plant the evidence on him!"

"You figured all wrong, is the only

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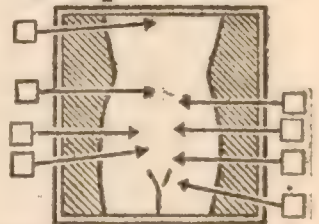
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trouble, Mr. Farrow. Because I can prove that Haley is your man. Just go ask him to show you that pearl-grey stetson he always wore. And he won't be able to show it to you, Mr. Farrow, *because he's gotten rid of it!*"

"Because, you mean, Williams, you stole his hat from him! To plant the blame on him!"

It was only in the back of his mind that Jack Williams found opportunity to marvel at the hand Fate took in the affairs of men, to wonder at the amazing coincidence of John Farrow coming to suspect him of the rustling, literally shoving at him the chance he had been debating, to sacrifice himself to save Ned Haley—and then John Farrow biting, hook, line, and sinker on Jack Williams' fast-thinking disposition of any subsequent investigation of Ned Haley's pearl-grey stetson, which undoubtedly carried a bullet hole and of which Haley had undoubtedly got rid. And to wonder at what in heaven's name had caused Farrow to suspect him "from the beginning". That trail-bum that he'd never seen before, starting that fight with him in town—had that done it? And where had Farrow got the idea that he, Jack Williams, had been wearing a new hat?...

Yes, only the back of Jack Williams' mind could be spared for such thoughts. Because the front of it was going to have to decide lightning-fast on his next move. Even admitting his guilt needed to be done convincingly, and that could entail risk of being cut to ribbons by Farrow's gunnies—

And then the final fact of what he had stepped into exploded sickeningly in Jack Williams' brain. *He'd have to let himself be killed.*

Because if he only let himself be taken prisoner, Ned Haley would confess. If Ned Haley were the decent kid that Jack Williams was sure he was, he'd never let an innocent man take his place in jail—

"The hell I did," Jack Williams muttered thickly. And before the

words were out, he was reaching.

John Farrow was reaching too. And the three gunnies.

Jack Williams, in fact, never got his weapon clear of leather. John Farrow and the three gunnies, Olsen, Peters, and Mahaffay, cut him to pieces....

"IT WAS FUNNY," John Farrow said the next morning at breakfast, and his wife particularly noted, that this was the first hint of uncertainty about Jack Williams that, from the beginning, she'd found in his voice; for he spoke slowly, not like him, hesitantly, "here he was a rustler, a—a *badman*, and he wasn't fast on the draw at all. He was slow, in fact..."

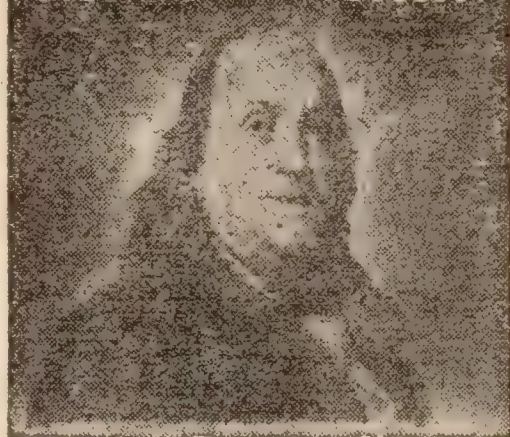
"Who told you about seeing him wearing a new hat?"

"Nobody. I made that up. I took a chance on its being true as a way of tricking Williams into a confession."

"Mr. Williams is a badman," Billy said absently from the floor where, having finished his breakfast, his lips pursed now with the great importance of what he was doing, he very deliberately added another turret to the fort he was building of the big new blocks his grandmother had sent him from the East for his birthday.... End.



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THE MAN ON THE STAGE

(cont'd from page 112)

THIS WAS the vicious part—Norah unconscious, terrified and run-away teams drawing the lumbering coach, Cole himself with only one good arm. He holstered the Colt's, swung his right leg over the black's neck, braced it momentarily against the saddle and leaped. The black veered away, and for a split second Cole hung in mid-air, the whirling, grinding wheels of the coach directly beneath him, reaching and hungry.

He felt his hand, his right hand, close on the seat rail. His left met it, but his feet were dangling and touched momentarily the spokes of the front wheel. But he drew himself up, slowly and painfully, and at last sat atop the bounding seat.

The reins, dropped by Rupp as he had stood up, dragged now on the ground between the teams. Cole leaped from the seat, landing astride one of the wheelers, and clinging to harness, leaned far to one side, finally grasping the trailing reins.

He straightened then, hauling back with all his strength. Slowly, slowly the horses came under his control until he could draw them to a full halt, could climb back into the seat and set the brake.

He was down then and into the coach. Norah, bleeding slightly from her bruised mouth, was stirring and moaning, but she clung to him and drew herself close.

There was time for relief and time for thankfulness. The time for hunger and for love would be later, when Denver City was peaceful again.

The Osten boy would have his father's gold; the Vigilantes would have Daugherty and the remainder of Rupp's gang. And Cole would have Norah, and the stage to the Vasquez....

THE END

LAST CHANCE

by STEPHEN PAYNE

Odd that in this moment Bob Elkton should be comparing Enid, the ranch girl, with Audrey, the girl from the East....

BOB ELKTON would have swung on past the Clay ranch with no more than a friendly wave of his hand, had not Enid Clay called, "Hello, Bob!" and beckoned to him.

Slightly annoyed, because he had very little time to waste if he were to catch the bus for Denver, Bob turned in through the open gate and rode to where Enid stood in the June sunlight.

"How're things with you, Enid?" he asked, pleasantly surprised to see that in the five years he had been gone the girl had matured amazingly. Seeing her now brought back old memories of good times they'd had together in days before he'd ridden away to become a rodeo contestant.

Now at last Bob had broken with that tough life and was looking ahead to settling down to a happy future with Audrey. Odd that in this moment he should be comparing Enid, the ranch girl, with dazzling Audrey, noting how sharp the contrast between them.

Enid he had known always as a friend and pal. Audrey he had met scarcely a year ago when he had been performing in New York City, and it had been a case of love at first sight. They had been corresponding ever since, and recently Audrey had written to say that on a certain day she would meet him in Denver. *Don't disappoint me, for I have our future all planned, dear—*

"You remember Carmichael's little ranch, Bob?—we used to sit our horses on that piney hillside overlooking it, and day-dream—"

"Sure I do! And is that spread a honey!"

"You didn't imagine that Carmichael would ever part with it, did you?"

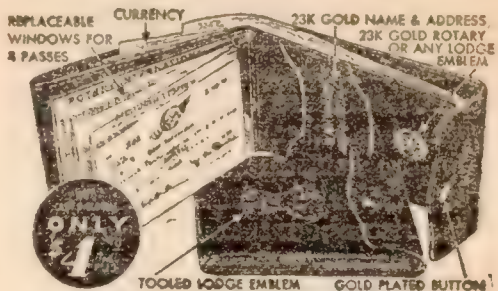
"The last I knew, the canny old Scot would rather have sold his wife....Enid, you don't mean—"

"Yes, Bob," nodding her bright head. "He'll sell. I beckoned to you because I knew you would be interested."

"Good girl!" he ejaculated. "Hmm. I'll miss the bus to Denver, but I think I'll see Carmichael now and make a deal if I can. Audrey—she's the girl I'm going to marry, I guess you've heard—will love that place as much as I do.... If this works out, Enid you must be the first one to visit us."

(continued on page 126)

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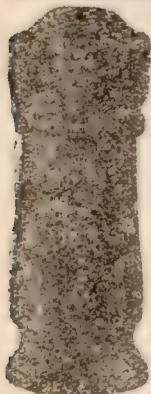
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THE BUS drew into its Denver terminal, and Bob's eager eyes picked Audrey out of the waiting crowd. Tall and stately with her air of proud reserve, she stood a little apart, a perfect hat perched on her perfectly arranged golden hair. He came up to her, breathless with his joy of seeing her once again, and would have gathered her into a close, hard embrace had she not held him off.

"Bob, you've kept me waiting one whole day. It's upset many of my plans."

"Wh—Gosh! Audrey, I'm sorry as all get-out," his eager, hungry glances searching her face.

"And I certainly expected you to be dressed for the city," the girl continued. "You're not in the arena now, rustling—or is it wrestling—cows?"

"I hadn't thought of dressing up. I just thought of you and how happy you'd be over the grand surprise."

"Surprise? All your telegram said was, 'Delayed one day.' Oh! You had more money coming than you expected? Is that it?"

Bob frowned ever so slightly. "Nothing like that, Audrey. I've just bought a ranch—for us!"

Audrey faced him lightning in her grey-green eyes. "You've bought—a—ranch, Bob?"

"It was a miracle that I was able to get it, though the down payment took all my money. We're in debt for the balance; yet, working together— Why, Audrey, what's wrong?"

"You did this, Bob Elkton, without consulting me? After I'd told you I had definite plans for us?"

In bewilderment, he stammered, "I was sure you'd understand; so sure you'd be happy about the deal..."

"Oh, I'm happy! So darned happy I could scream.... Bob, I never, never planned to settle down on a ranch. You should have understood that from my letters."

Wordlessly he stared at the girl he still believed the most beautiful in the world. What had he actually known about her background, her life, her family, her friends? Nothing at all. Now it was being brought home to him that they had always lived and moved in worlds far, far apart.

Audrey laid slender gloved fingers on his arm. On her lips was a faint smile, but none in her eyes as she said quickly, "I'm afraid this has all been a mistake. Goodbye, Bob."...

The Carmichael ranch was indescribably lovely in the June twilight, yet Bob Elkton took no notice of it. Carmichael and his wife were gone. And this deserted, lonely place was not the happy home of which he had dreamed. Yet he must carry on and in some manner rebuild his shattered life.

Gloomily he set about the necessary

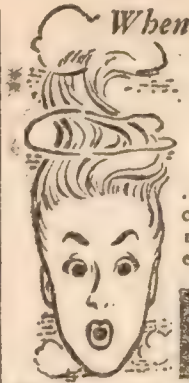
(continued on page 128)

(cont'd from page 72)

shooting. Bates wasn't such a bad kid. He had brains and after a while he wouldn't be so cocky. Besides, it was partly his own fault, because he hadn't shot square with the kid. Maybe because he wasn't so young any more and had responsibilities, he was a little jealous of the younger man.

But there were more important things, he thought, and he looked at Molly again, and he saw the fullness of her, and he suddenly felt good that the trouble was all over and he could go ahead carrying out his plans with the spread so that his child would have something to be proud of.

And it was good to know that he hadn't failed Gordon, too. But he was tired, and the wounds hurt, so he closed his eyes. He guessed maybe he was a little cocky when he wore the star, too, and he was sort of pleased that there was a younger feller around to wear it now so he could look after Molly the way he wanted to.... End



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LAST CHANCE

(continued from page 126)

chores, and was clumping to the empty, empty house with a filled milk pail in either hand when a horse's hoofs made noise in the twilight and a cheery voice called: "Hello, Bob! I'll bet I'm the first to call since you came home.... Where's Audrey?"

Bob plunked the pails down hard and stepped close to Enid Clay's spirited black pony. He said bitterly, "She didn't come. It's all off."

"Oh, Bob!" And a tear glistened in each of Enid's warm brown eyes. "I can realize how unhomelike you found the ranch, coming back to it all alone.... A good meal will cheer you up. I'll get supper for you."

In complete silence he looked at the sturdy dark girl, discovering things he'd never found in Audrey's perfection of beauty. Bob Elkton realized suddenly that Enid had richer and more priceless gifts: warmth and sympathy, generosity and strength of character, and, greater than all of these, an understanding heart.

"Get supper? Fine! Enid you'll fit into that little house as a good glove fits a hand." Impulsively he reached up and plucked her from her saddle, stood her gently on her feet. "I—I was knocked over, like a thrown bronze buster who lands on his head. But I'm awake now. Can you believe me?"

The girl's eyes and her face were quite unreadable, and she made no answer.

"I'm awake now," he stammered. "We—we go for the same things. Things that together we could always cling to."

He thought, *You fool! No girl wants to be second choice. Then he heard her whisper, "But, Bob, won't the memory of Audrey come between us?"*

Her eyes and her lips had become so provocative that he kissed her soundly. "Enid, all I'll remember is that I had to get singed in order to realize how much I love you."

A little wind rippled the meadow grass and brought to his nostrils the scent of wild flowers and of sage. The subdued little noises of a ranch about to go to sleep were sweet music in the twilight, and Enid murmured, "Bob, darling, I've always loved you."

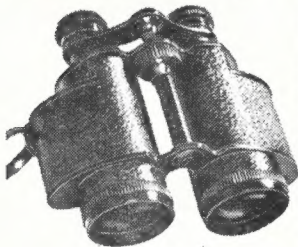
AFTER THEY had carried the pails into the kitchen, Enid walked on to a neat bedroom. Here she tossed her hat on the dresser and stood regarding the reflection of a girl who looked back at her with a strange little smile on her lips. To this reflection Enid Clay whispered: "You'd forgive me if you knew, Bob, that you never need know that I risked your future and mine on one throw of the dice!... Bob you were so sure that Audrey would love this ranch; yet from the little I'd heard about her, I was every bit as sure she would hate it!" —● End

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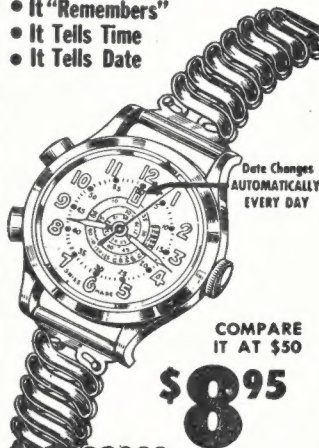
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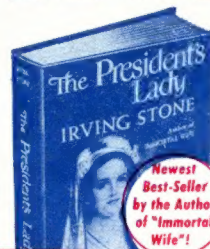
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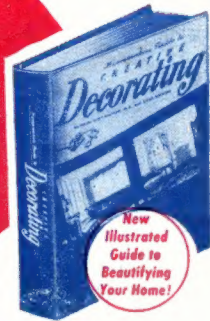
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